The Great Opportunity

The American Church in 2050

PINETOPS
FOUNDATION

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Introduction

We began this project as an attempt to understand how we as a foundation should think about supporting the work of the church in America. We had the sense that there are many excellent and remarkable ministries with which we could partner, but we lacked a way to understand what was our particular place to contribute, the best stewardship of our resources.

What we found challenged many of our assumptions.

As a result of months of research, we now think we are at a pivotal moment in the life of the American church. What we found was the largest missions opportunity ever in American history, and if we move quickly, we can help introduce tens of millions of young people to Jesus over the next 30 years.

This project began as a listening tour, speaking to as many Christian leaders in America as we could: pastors, ministry heads, funders, theologians, academics; Catholics, Evangelicals, mainline denominations, African American churches, post-denominational Charismatics, immigrant missionaries.[1] It was a wonderful experience and tremendously encouraging to hear how God is most certainly at work building His church in our country. We also focused specifically on the United States for reasons that we will explore later, but primarily because the United States is a context we know well and where we saw need.

When we asked the question "If you could do anything to help the church be more fruitful over the next 30 years, what would it be?", it was a surprise to us how novel the thought was to many that we asked. Thirty years seemed right because it represented the time span of more than a generation—long enough to be a career, but short enough for one to imagine the impact at the end. And yet the question, while encouraging in that we received so many thoughtful and insightful responses, was clearly not one frequently being asked.

What was also clear was that initially many of the recommendations reflected great wisdom and experience but, for understandable reasons, were necessarily also a reflection of the particular, often anecdotal experiences of those with whom we spoke. Admittedly, we struggled with this. It was like asking how to get across country without a map. You could probably get there, but you often got pointed in different directions.

What was also interesting were the questions that were asked back. Why the church? What do you mean by the church? Isn't even the concept of building for the long-term (though we didn't think 30 years that long) misguided when there are needs right now? Isn't the answer in the question—just give all of your resources to churches so God can do with it what He will?

If you could do anything to help the church be more fruitful over the next 30 years, what would it be?

Some First Principles

To help answer those questions, it might be useful to set out some of our first principles. We believe that the church, however imperfectly embodied in particular locations, is the means by which God has chosen to reflect His Kingdom on this earth. The church would in its community be a different way of living; its relationships, thoughts,

[1] As an aside, we should add that the perspectives expressed in this report are ours alone; no person or organization interviewed should be perceived as endorsing what is written. They were interviewed as experts in their fields, and we learned much from the collective wisdom of those participants. We are extraordinarily grateful for their time and insights.

There is another understanding in which the world is the object of God's love.

actions, economies would all reflect God's vision for His creation. It would offer the world an alternative from the brokenness of sin. The church, however frail its ministry, is the means by which God equips, empowers, and forms His people to do His work in the world, to proclaim His good news and invite others to be part of the story of which they did not know.

There is a sense of the world which is set up in contrast to the church, but there is another understanding in which the world is the object of God's love. We believe that God so loved the world, the people here in time and physical place, that He gave Himself to bring it back to Him. We also believe that it is our calling as Christians to go into every part of this world, including our cities and towns around us, and invite others to come back to Him. That once receiving the invitation, they would enter into a different community. They would be taught, apprenticed, discipled—knowing Christ more and thus becoming more like Him.

We also believe that Christians are sent back to be good in the world, acting as salt and light in a decaying, darkening place. That is part of what it is to be like Jesus. But we want to stress that it is easy, we think, to believe that whatever historical moment in which one lives is growing darker than the one before, that there is some great crisis. And it is probably true that every generation has thought this of their time, probably because it was. The world is broken by our sin and always decaying, and the church is always bringing restoration. All of us see the consequence of the fall, but we should not be surprised by it; no more than being shocked that the room gets dark each evening if we don't turn on a light.

So we believe we should make the most of our time and be concerned about the world, but we are also not fearful of our time in history. As Richard Neuhaus said, "We have not the right to despair because despair is a sin, and finally we have not the reason to despair quite simply because Christ is risen." It is one of our jobs in the church, as both a community and as individuals sent out, to seek the peace and welfare of the cities where and when we are placed.

We believe that when the church does its job well, we should see, as in the parable, fruit that endures. We like how Tim Keller puts it in *Center Church*: "When fruitfulness is our criterion for evaluation, we are held accountable but not crushed by the expectation that a certain number of lives will be changed dramatically under our ministry." We care about the way we work, the quality of our work, and the results. All are important.

This is what created concern for us. We had the sense that our fruitfulness in America was not what it once was or could be. But we

lacked a comprehensive answer to these questions, linking theology, church history, good data, and practical ministry into a point of view of how fruitful we are now and how we could bear even more in the future.

This report is the start of an effort to answer those questions. We fully recognize that we do not think we have all the answers, our data is imperfect in many places, and God will build His church as He deems fit in ways that may not be obvious to us.

This report is not intended to be a theological analysis of American ecclesiology, nor is it an argument for a particular construct of the engagement between church and culture. It is not a critique of any concerns that one might have with specific strains of American Evangelical theology nor a response to any specific event in our society.

Nor are we writing a pastoral letter on spiritual practices. For our churches to thrive, they must of course participate in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, calling us to prayer, the Eucharist, preaching, repentance, scripture, and more. We most certainly need God's presence actively working in our lives, our congregations, and our ministries. How that manifests is not our goal to solve here. There are important discussions to be had on each of those topics and many more in the American church.

But we do not think that there is much question, regardless of one's tradition, that the church's mission is to be Christ's body on this earth, going out into all the world and making disciples of all people who would respond, including Americans. This report is at its heart an attempt to inform practitioners and funders at a strategic level how we might do better in that mission. We believe that God gives us wit, wisdom, and will if we would use it, and we are trying to prayerfully and thoughtfully discern in our moment how best to follow Him.

The next 30 years will represent the largest missions opportunity in the history of America.

Summary of Findings

The report spends much of its effort on the specific actions that churches, ministries, and funders might take to meet the opportunity in front of us.

Chapter 1: The Great Opportunity looks at religious affiliation in the United States over time—effectively how the American church is doing in creating lasting fruit. We have taken data from many surveys and research studies exploring religion in the United States, along with fertility, mortality, and immigration, to project in three scenarios how the U.S. church will grow or contract over the next 30 years.

If we can return the church's retention back to Gen X rates, we will see 16 million more youth begin or continue a life with Jesus.

The bottom line: the next 30 years will represent the largest missions opportunity in the history of America. It is the largest and fastest numerical shift in religious affiliation in the history of this country. Even in the most optimistic scenarios, Christian affiliation in the U.S. shrinks dramatically, and in our base case, over 1 million youth at least nominally in the church today will choose to leave each year for the next three decades. 35 million youth raised in families that call themselves Christians will say that they are not by 2050. The good news? If we can return the church's retention and evangelism back to Gen X rates, we will see 16 million more youth begin or continue a life with Jesus.

We believe that our base case likely understates the problem. While it is hard to find clear data, as far as we can tell, this is the single largest generational loss of souls in history who were nominally raised in the church and no longer call themselves followers of Jesus. This is not a gradual shift as in Europe (and also fundamentally different; we do not believe this is the result of secularization but indifference). The need is urgent; the last Millennials are now nearly 20, and all data suggests that most people settle on their religious affiliation by 25, with the door closing by 35. Statistically, though perhaps not ultimately, we've lost much of the opportunity for Millennials, and the first wave of Gen Z is now entering college.[2]

We will also explore why we believe that the decline of the American church is a matter of real concern—for those who do not know Christ and also for the impact beyond the walls of our church buildings. Young people are the future leaders, pastors, theologians, parents, teachers, and more of the church. To lose any, certainly—but especially a loss as great as this—is to lose a future source of revival and growth.

Chapters 2-6

The next several chapters will examine specific areas where targeted interventions can substantially help address the opportunity, exploring both the causes and solutions for each area.

We will also look at many case studies from earlier periods in church history. While context and particulars may be different, human brokenness is constant, and the responses of church leaders can inform our thinking. We are not historians, though we spoke with many who are, and these are not full explorations of historical events. We took a specific lens of how and why church leaders in

[2] For the purpose of this report, Millennials refer to those born from 1980-2000; Gen Z refers to those born from 2000-2020.

different moments bore fruit. We were surprised how often across different eras that common strategies and methods occurred, with strong leadership that was operationally excellent.

Chapter 2: Starting New Churches

Church planting in the US will need to double to triple from current rates to address population growth and anticipated church closures of older congregations. The American church needs to plant more than 215,000 churches in the next 30 years to maintain status quo, and to meet the needs of the unaffiliated an additional 60,000 churches. There is a dramatic need to invest specifically in planting in emerging urban cities reaching those who have left the church; Gen Z (which follows the Millennials) is the largest generation in American history and will likely increase urban density over the next two decades. The church will need to find new models for lowering the cost of planting while increasing the number of leaders who reflect the increasing diversity of urban populations, all without sacrificing historic orthodoxy. We also understand that revitalizing declining and closing churches would reduce the need; depending on the nature of the revitalization (for example with new staff, new members, and financial investment) a revitalized church would for our purposes be effectively like a new church start.

Chapter 3: Mission for Youth

The church must transform youth discipleship. The models that served us for the last fifty years are empirically becoming less effective in our current climate. Even a modest improvement in the rates of disaffiliation will dramatically alter the future of the American church. Historically, the church has often grown by the mission effort of the youth, making them both the largest missions opportunity and the largest missions resource. The majority of the disaffiliated did not go through a crisis of faith or intellectually reject church teachings. They left because they just weren't interested in the Christian life they saw. Our recommendations try to address this disconnect. We suggest innovations in youth ministry models that engage the whole church, equip families to walk together with Christ, and call youth to embrace the new missions opportunities provided by a changing religious landscape. We also need to increase the scope and scale of missions at post-secondary institutions, including state, community, and vocational colleges.

Chapter 4: Reaching New Audiences

We must evangelize digitally. Millennials spend over nine hours on technology media consumption each day. The church has historically led society in the adoption of new models of media for outreach. However, the church lags in prominent presence engaging those who are early in their faith journey. We look at some ways to spur innovation, including developing talent pipelines, specific digital strategies, and encouraging churches to leverage young members to drive digital capacity for churches. Ministries and other para-church organizations should also re-examine their models in light of a digital native audience.

Chapter 5: Care for the Poor

The American church should be famous for its radical care for the poor, and in so doing, point people to God's sacrificial love. Care for the least among us is a central, historic teaching of the church and was its core public witness in its early history. We must return to that public witness for God's glory. There is tremendous work today being done by the church in our country, with Christian churches and non-profits generating over $1.2T of social good. However, the majority of the unaffiliated believe that the church is of no benefit, and there are many major needs in which the church can play a part to prove otherwise. Millennials and Gen Z have a higher interest in social entrepreneurship and justice. We explore how to increase the ways in which the church can be more visible in its work, increase their investment in care for the poor, and encourage social entrepreneurship.

Chapter 6: Building Long Term Witness

The church must build leadership for the long-term. The church has historically invested in the life of the mind and future leaders, understanding its significance for the health of the church. Currently 2-5 percent of tenured professors at top 40 universities would self-identify as actively Christian,[3] which says much about how American Christianity, particularly the Evangelical branch, has not prioritized the life of the mind. This is a departure from historic intellectual engagement and early American Evangelical witness, which produced many great scholars. The church also faces a new set of challenges in a shifting cultural landscape. We recommend building a pipeline of Christian thought leaders and scholars; creating integrated models of engagement at universities with faculty, students, and alumni; intentionally developing the next generation of Christian leaders who regularly research and convene on major questions facing the church and society.

Chapter 7: Counting the Cost

Finally, we will *size the funding requirements for these strategies* and compare that to existing funding flows in the American church. We will identify ways to unlock grassroots support for many of these interventions, looking at many of the crowd-funded models that are seeing success in other social categories. The good news is that many of the solutions are well known and within the current funding capacity of American Christians.

After working on this report for nearly a year, we are deeply hopeful. God is powerfully at work in our churches and communities. However, our mission field has changed, and how we respond must change as well. Our particular moment in history is pivotal; perhaps for the first time we have the data, resources, and insights to foresee a coming loss of millions of future Christians from a life with Jesus. It will be the largest single generational loss of faith in American history, maybe ever. We cannot wait. We need the American church to make the most of this Great Opportunity.

[3] Excludes specifically Christian universities such as Notre Dame

Chapter One

The Great Opportunity

Much has been made of the disaffiliation of youth from the Christian religion in America. Books, reports, articles, blogs, and more have commented extensively on the phenomenon. Entire conferences have been devoted to the subject. The central issue is that many young people who were raised in the Christian tradition are now saying that they no longer identify with Christ, that they have no religion in particular.

Assuming trends continue, roughly 35 million young people who were raised in Christian households will leave the faith. This is over a million people each year for the next three decades. If trends worsen, that number could reach as high as 42 million. However, if we can return our retention back to Gen X rates, one generation ago, we will see over 16 million youth that would otherwise not know Jesus have a life with Him.

"If I never won souls, I would sigh till I did. I would break my heart over them if I could not break their hearts. Though I can understand the possibility of an earnest sower never reaping, I cannot understand the possibility of an earnest sower being content not to reap. I cannot comprehend any one of you Christian people trying to win souls and not having results, and being satisfied without results."

Charles Spurgeon

"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people."

Paul

This chapter may be a bit dizzying for those who don't enjoy statistics, but it is very important. It is important because it helps explain exactly what is at stake. If we return to retention and evangelism like we saw just 20 years ago, more people will be saved than during both Great Awakenings, the African American church growth after the Civil War, the Azusa revivals, and every Billy Graham conversion —combined. The numbers are just that big.

We did not conduct additional primary research, at least not at this stage. Our concerns are primarily those of a practitioner. How many people are saying that they would no longer call themselves Christian over the next 30 years? Is it relatively few or the entire generation? Where are they coming from? Why are they leaving? Where are they going? If the church is relatively unaffected, as some reports suggest, perhaps the issue is not as concerning as it might seem on the surface.

We should also note that we did not attempt to determine who is really Christian.[1] We took as sufficient one's self-identification as Christian. Discipleship, church attendance, doctrine, and other marks of Christian fidelity are not explored here; if one calls oneself a Christian they are therefore so identified.

If we return to retention and evangelism like we saw just 20 years ago, more people will be saved than during both Great Awakenings, the African American church growth after the Civil War, the Azusa revivals, and every Billy Graham conversion — combined.

[1] Some have argued that in fact strong religious intensity is remarkably constant in America over the last several decades (see for example Schnabel and Bock). We think this is this consistent with our analysis. However, that is a different thing than religious affiliation. We leave to more divine perspectives than our own, for example, as to how often one prays correlates to eternal consequence. There is a strong loss of moderate to mild religious intensity. Nonetheless, the shift from calling oneself Christian to no longer identifying as such is deeply consequential for both those switching and for the American church.

We looked at many different reports and surveys examining Millennial attitudes towards religion.[2] We relied most heavily on four major research efforts: the Religious Landscape Study produced by the Pew Research Center (in 2007 and in 2014); the Baylor Religion Survey (2007-2011); the PRRI/RNS September 2016 Survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute; and the Gallup Annual Religion Surveys (1992-2016).

Not surprisingly, each used slightly different methodologies and asked different questions. Based on those primary data sources, we built out religious switching scenarios for the next 30 years, using the most up-to-date switching and attitudinal data, harmonizing assumptions across primary data sources. For a detailed review of the assumptions behind the model, please see the explanation at the end of this chapter.

Our projections are based on modeling techniques akin to what one might use in a professional context for market forecasts. They are certain to diverge over time from reality, and we have called out our assumptions wherever we can.[3] Our purpose is to identify directional trends and orders of magnitude, and we believe them to be useful for understanding the scope of the challenge, if not the exact number.

[2] For more on our research sources, please see the bibliography section at the end of this report.
[3] The models are available for download at www.greatopportunity.org.

I. Base Case Scenario

Our base case scenario is sobering. By using the switching rates described at the end of this chapter, we arrived at a conservative estimate of how we think the future will play out if things continue as they are.

What is remarkable about this picture is that the growth in the unaffiliated is almost entirely due to religious switching. The birth rate of the unaffiliated is substantially lower than other populations, at 1.7, and considerably lower than the replacement rate of 2.1. Unlike the religious populations, the unaffiliated are not growing by births. We found that over half of all people who switch affiliation over the next 30 years land in the unaffiliated. Furthermore, since the unaffiliated have the highest retention rates of any religious affiliation, they are likely to stay.

We found that Catholics and Evangelicals are near equal contributors to the decline; Catholics due to higher attrition, and Evangelicals due to accelerating attrition and a larger starting population. We found that mainlines decline, but not as much as one might think, due primarily to Evangelicals switching into mainline denominations. Also, Catholics do not decline as an overall percentage nearly as much as we would expect due to high levels of immigration (nearly three times larger than Evangelical rates). While Evangelicals decline, they still retain a large final share of the population, due primarily to the large switch in rates from Catholics, mainline, and unaffiliated, as well as higher fertility.

In addition to the base case scenario, we also projected out worse case and better case scenarios. We believe these outline a range of possible outcomes and help define the potential ground to be won, or lost, by improving retention rates within the church.

By the year 2050:

35 million

youth raised in Christian homes will disaffiliate from Christianity, which is over one million per year

73% to 59%

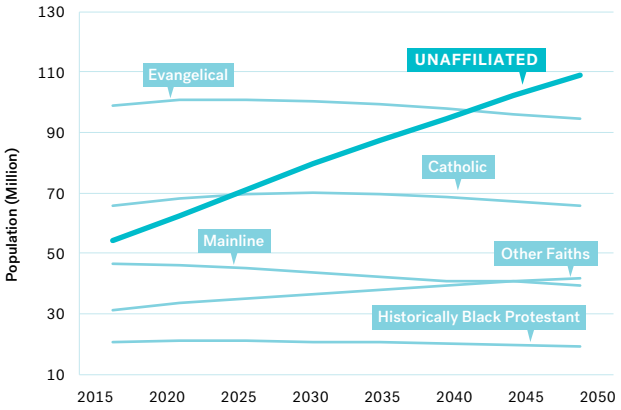
The overall Christian percentage of the population will drop to 59 percent, from today's 73 percent

50 million

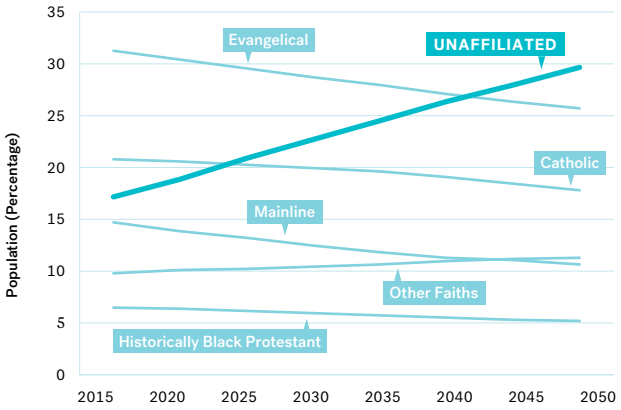
The unaffiliated population will nearly double as a percentage of the U.S. population, from 17 percent today to 30 percent in 2050, an increase of more than 50 million people

BASE CASE WITH PROJECTED GEN Z SWITCHING RATES

Religious Demographic Growth to 2050



Religious Demographic Growth to 2050, by Percentage



Within this worse case, but by no means the worst case scenario, the impact by 2050 is this:

42 million
youth raised in Christian homes will disaffiliate from Christianity, which is ~1.4 million per year

73%-54%
The overall Christian percentage of the population will drop to 54 percent, from today's 73 percent

70 million
The unaffiliated population will more than double as a percentage of the U.S. population, from 17 percent today to 35 percent in 2050, an increase of more than 70 million people

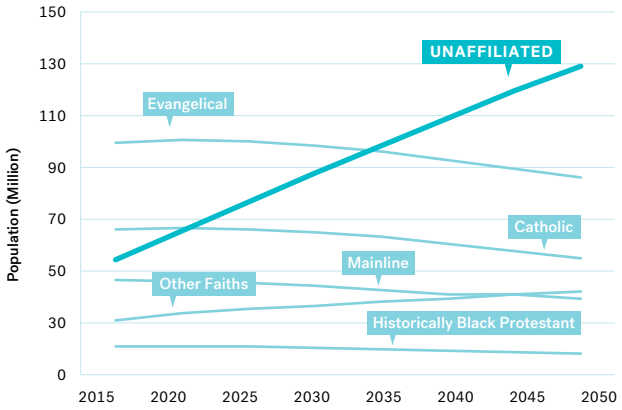
II. Worse Case Scenario

Some have argued that disaffiliation is accelerating. As a result, we have created a more aggressive scenario in which we assume that all Christian switching rates to the unaffiliated will mirror the current mainline switching rate of 38 percent. While this may not be the worst case scenario (we can certainly imagine higher disaffiliation rates), it is certainly worse than current numbers.

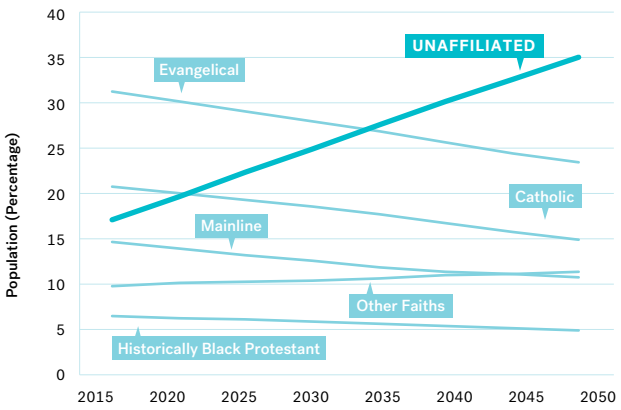
Additionally, in this scenario immigration patterns change such that Catholic immigration decreases from 35 percent of yearly immigrants to 18 percent, and unaffiliated increase from 23 percent to 40 percent. In effect, this scenario forecasts a future where Christian communities are even less effective in forming their youth. The outcome would be that the unaffiliated population will more than double, increasing to over 70 million people.

WORSE CASE: ALL CHRISTIAN SECTS FOLLOW MAINLINE ATTRITION RATES

Religious Demographic Growth to 2050



Religious Demographic Growth to 2050, by Percentage



III. Better Case Scenario

In our better case scenario, we assume attrition rates return to what they were a generation ago, with Gen X.

This means that overall Christian attrition to the unaffiliated is reduced by about one-third, returning to an average of about 20 percent attrition to the unaffiliated rather than 30 percent.[4] The result of these changes is a very different picture than the base case. Additionally, Evangelicals are still the majority religious group and the unaffiliated have begun to level off at around 24 percent of the population. We think even better scenarios can be imagined, but that this scenario is optimistically within reach.

[4] Specifically, Evangelical attrition to unaffiliated returns to 18 percent, Catholic returns to 23 percent, mainline returns to 26 percent, and Historically Black Protestant attrition rates return to 12 percent, Additionally, unaffiliated attrition rates to Christianity return to Gen X levels, at 48 percent, instead of 20 percent.

Within this better case scenario the impact is this by the year 2050:

26 million
youths raised in Christian homes will disaffiliate from Christianity, which is ~800,000 per year

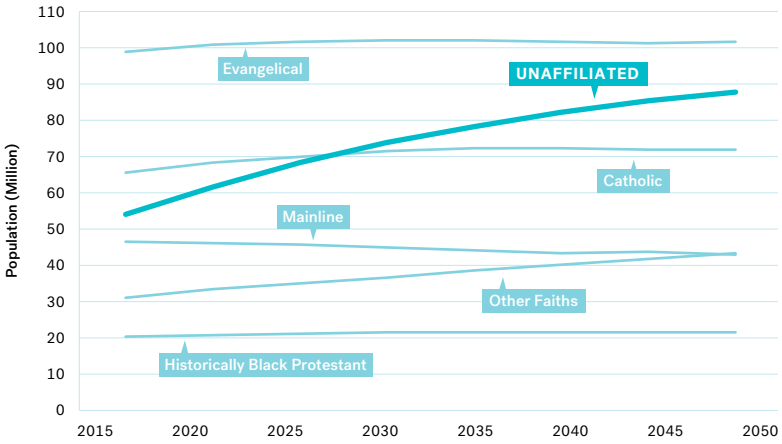
16-22 million
youth will remain within or switch into the Christian faith, compared to other scenarios

73% to 64%
The overall Christian percentage of the population will drop much less, to 64 percent, from today's 73 percent

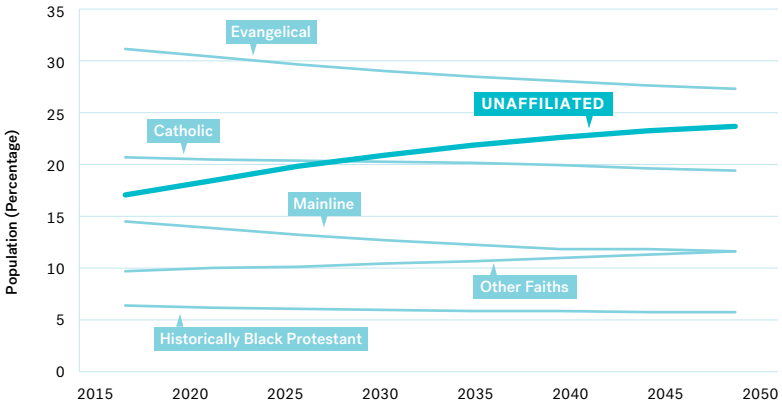
34 million
The unaffiliated population will start leveling off at approximately 24 percent of the population, from 17 percent today, an increase of 34 million people

BETTER CASE: RETURN TO GEN X RATES

Religious Demographic Growth to 2050



Religious Demographic Growth to 2050, by Percentage



What should we make of all of these projections?

It is worth noting that all Christians in America still comprise the majority (59 percent) of the religious affiliation in our base case. Even in our worse case, Christians are still the dominant religious affiliation. We will not be a secular Europe with empty churches on every corner. We cannot stress this distinction enough; over 50% of Americans will call themselves Christian in a culture that no longer values that identification as it had historically.

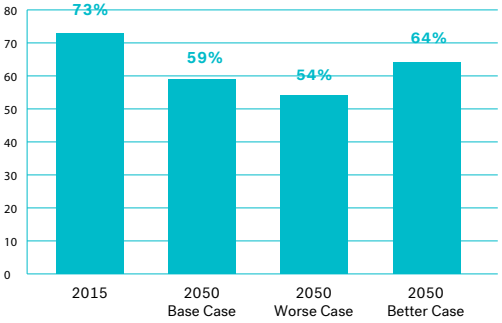
However, a shift from over seven or eight out of ten people in America self-identifying as Christian to five out of ten is a very large cultural change. It will *feel very different* (and already does to many!) when nearly half of Americans are not Christian. But it is not as if Christians will be an insignificant, irrelevant fringe in America. Our ability and resources to do the mission of the church will be large, and the American church will still be in a far more privileged position than most churches around the world.

Nonetheless, the base case scenario represents a profound shift: over 1,000,000 young people every year—children who were in our Sunday schools, our youth groups, our confirmation classes, our missions trips—are saying that Christ is no longer He with whom they choose to identify.

To put that number in context, it is larger to dramatically larger than the number of abortions that occur every year in America.[4] The discussion of the sanctity of life is an important one in our society, and many Evangelicals and Catholics have been willing to pay very high political and cultural costs to protect the unborn through advocacy in the political and legal arenas. The loss of our youth to disaffiliation is even larger and fraught with deep theological and eternal consequence. We cannot say with certainty what happens to the unborn when their life ends, but scripture is clear as to what happens to those who knew of Jesus and chose to live their lives apart from Him. God desires that all might be saved!

More to the point, the question of the loss of our next generations of Christians is one that does not require so high a cost in the political realm, though it may require more of our effort. It does not require intervening outside of our church. *We do not need policy change to*

PROJECTED PERCENTAGE OF CHRISTIANS IN AMERICA

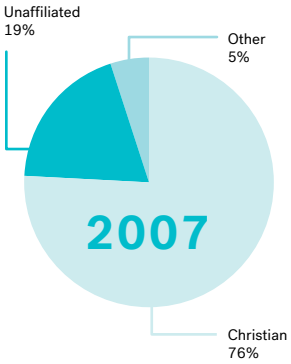


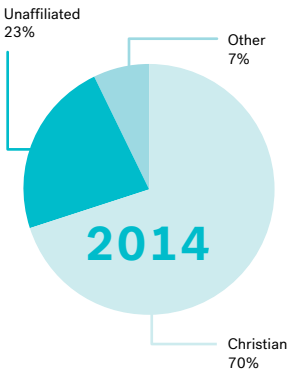
Base case: 35 million disaffiliate
Worse case: 42 million disaffiliate
Better case: 19 million disaffiliate

[4] The base case unaffiliated is larger than both the Guttmacher Institute number in 2015 of 926,000 abortions, and over 50 percent larger than the CDC reported numbers.

One objection we have heard is that the unaffiliated will return after their 20s when they have children and form families. If this were true, we would have expected to see this in the Gen X population, as the youngest are now nearly 40. However, disaffiliation for Gen X has increased by 4 percent over the last seven years. Whatever return to the church that may happen during family formation is being more than offset by departures.

GROWTH OF UNAFFILIATED, GENERATION X (BORN 1965-1980)





Source: Pew Research 2014 Religious Landscape Study

This is the largest evangelization opportunity in the history of our country. We have less than 35 years, and the clock is ticking.

disciple our youth. We do not need judicial appointees to introduce them to the person of Jesus. We do not need voter guides to invite them into God's great mission. Arguably, this is the central work of the church on the earth.

Equally, it is unlikely without a major move of God that the U.S. will return to the rates of Christian affiliation we saw 50 years ago. In our better case, the unaffiliated are still 24 percent of the U.S. population and likely to increase further. That is important, because it changes the posture of the church. We must engage a culture that has a substantial portion of its people who either no longer think the church is relevant or increasingly are ignorant of Christian context and language. The unaffiliated have the highest rate of retention for any religious group, and we think this, if unchanged, will create a permanent segment of people who have no exposure to the church as a normal course of affairs. Biblical allusions will be lost upon them; moral and ethical reasoning will be founded on shifting cultural norms.

We should also point out one incredibly important but perhaps obvious point. There is a high degree of urgency to this problem. As we describe at the end of this chapter, we use the assumption that the majority of religious switching takes place by age 25, and religious preference remains constant after age 35. This means that the majority of religious switching in the Millennial generation has already taken place, and that the oldest Millennials, now 37, have exited the switching window entirely. Gen Z, which is a larger cohort than Millennials (who were themselves the largest generation in American history), has now started entering the switching window. They will start exiting the window in just 13 years, and most of Gen Z will have left the window by 2050.

This is the largest evangelization opportunity in the history of our country. We have less than 35 years, and the clock is ticking.

Does this even matter?

In some of our conversations, the point was raised that frankly the American church could do with some pruning to recover greater fidelity. That may or may not be—God knows; we do not know. But we do not think that as Christians we should comfort ourselves by saying that losing much of the next generation improves the quality of our faith. A contracting church is unlikely to be a fruitful church.

Many of the great leaders in American church history—Edwards, Whitefield, Wesley, Asbury, Allen, Seymour, Graham—saw the church's fidelity increase precisely because it was concerned with reaching the lost, usually starting with the youth. Evangelicals are so named because they are concerned with sharing the good news with those who have not yet heard it.

We are hard pressed to understand a theology that does not take centrally the importance of the missional work of the church. Certainly, church practices of confession, prayer, scriptural study, and others are critically necessary. Equally as important is the necessity of missional outreach.

We would also contend that it would be a great loss to the world if the American church failed to steward its domestic mandate well. The American church has been the largest contributor to world missions and biblical translation in recent history – certainly for the last 150 years. The resources and wealth of the U.S. church are remarkable; they are among the largest contributors to aid and support in the world today outside of governments and international agencies. American church leaders have led major efforts in issues of justice. American theologians have made significant and unique contributions to doctrine, particularly in the relationship of religion and public life. To see these contributions diminish greatly in our generation would be a tragedy.

So where do we go from here? Christians are called to be a hopeful people, and we are hopeful for the future of the American church. We believe that with focused effort on the part of funders, church leaders, and ultimately Christians in America, we can move forward into a future that sees our churches thrive.

Chapter Postscript: How We Built the Projections Model

For those really interested in how we built the model or like reading Nate Silver, we have included this explanation of our approach and assumptions. We believe this work is based on the best available data and generally the assumptions are biased conservatively. Certainly though, additional research—particularly on switching rates—would improve the reliability of the projections.

Step 1: What is the starting point?

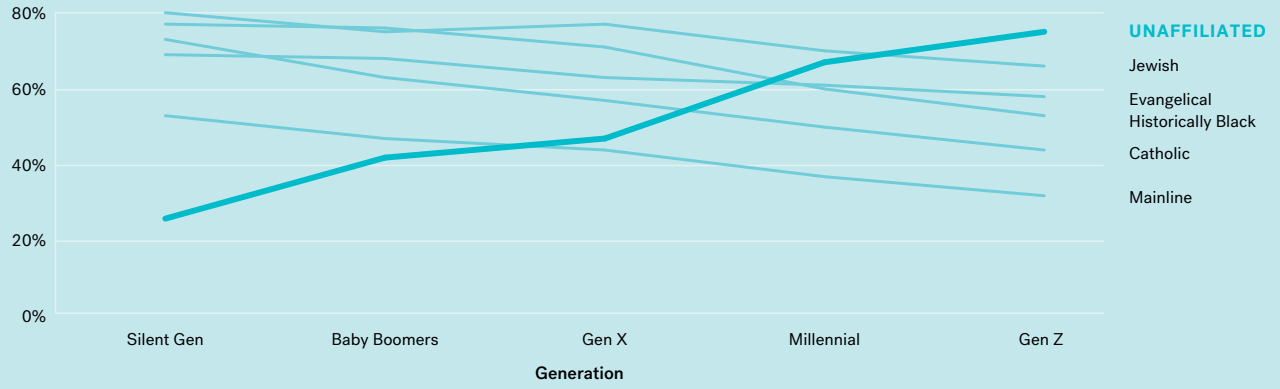
To build our model, we had to first determine how many religiously unaffiliated there truly are in the U.S. One of the major issues is that depending on how you ask the question, you get different answers. It has been rightly pointed out by some that "unaffiliated" growth could include people who no longer call themselves "Protestant" or "Catholic" or even "Evangelical," but in every other sense are still practicing Christians. This seemed to be one of the differences between the Pew surveys and Gallup or Baylor. What we found was when you subtracted "religion is important" from those who call themselves unaffiliated in the Pew Data, the results match within 2 to 3 percent of both Gallup and Baylor. Put differently, about 6 percent of all unaffiliated in Pew's data are probably Christians who don't like survey labels. This tracked in every check. Thus, using this discount methodology, we were able to use Pew's data for our 2016 starting point for all religious groups in the United States. We put the "religious nones" in the Evangelical segment. This may not be perfectly accurate, but the numbers correspond well to the growth of non-denominational Evangelical Christianity recorded in the Baylor study. Additionally, it is the most conservative assumption and effectively assumes more Christians exist in the tradition with higher retention.

Step 2: Who switches where?

This part was surprisingly difficult. The best data on switching is found in the Pew 2014 Religious Landscape Survey. However, because of the issue identified in Step 1, the switching rates themselves could be off. The Pew data was the only data we found that had starting religious affiliation and then switching rates and destinations. We began with Millennial switch out rates from Evangelicals, which Pew pegs at 39 percent (that is, 39 out of every 100 Evangelical kids will leave the church by the time they are 35). However, Pew's "switch-to-where data" was built without a specific generational cut. To account for the difference (39 percent of Millennials are leaving, but we only know where 35 percent are going), we put the other 4 percent in secular unaffiliated, because that lines up with the rapid growth of the secular unaffiliated in all the survey data over the last seven years. One could say we should discount that 4 percent a bit, but we think it is the most accurate reflection of reality.

From there, we had to make an assumption about Gen Z, for which there is almost no rigorous data (they are just entering the switching window). To estimate Gen Z switching rates, we chose to average the rate of change between the two previous age cohorts and then use that

% OF ADULTS WHO REMAIN IN THE RELIGION IN WHICH THEY WERE RAISED, BY GENERATIONAL COHORT



Source: Gallup Polling, aggregate

average to further discount the Millennial rates (see figure 1). One could argue that we should use a lower rate, but no data suggests that religious disaffiliation is holding steady or decreasing. For the last five years, disaffiliation has been increasing in the youth, and has increased over multiple generations. One could argue that we should use a higher rate—say, take the gap from Gen X to Millennial, and then use that to discount Gen Z—but we believe an average is a conservative, reasonable assumption. Again, we think more data here would be tremendously helpful.

Step 3: How many switch?

From here we had to make assumptions about when people switch. Research from Pew indicates that religious preferences harden around 35 (see figure 2). So we assumed that all switching occurs between the ages of 10 and 35, with 85 percent of that switching taking place before 25. In our model we then ran the switching calculation every five years, so that by the time any given cohort reached 35 all the switching had taken place. We then added in fertility using Pew data by religious group and U.S. Census mortality data to generate our population growth projections. We also include immigration, using the median projections from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Run the model every five years until 2050 and you get our base numbers.

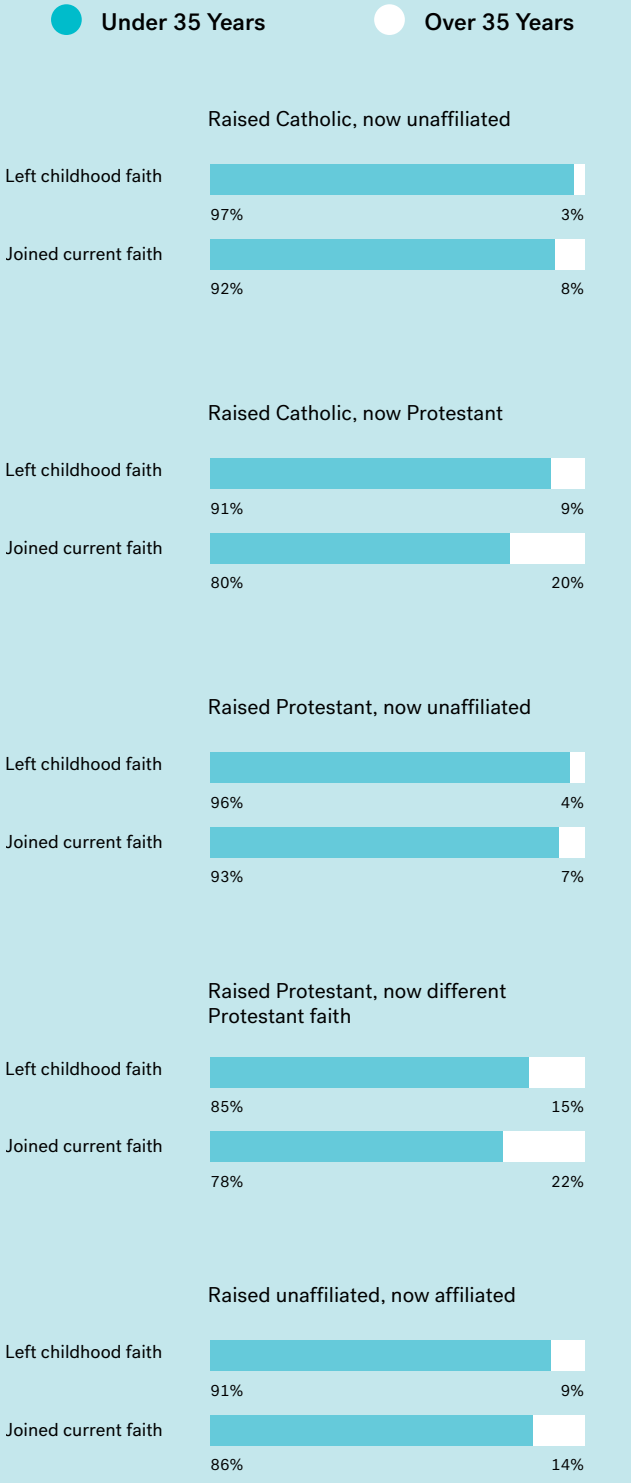
Step 4: Create scenarios

In addition to our base case, we built two scenarios by adjusting the switching rates.

- Worse Case Scenario: "All Christian Sects Follow Mainline Attrition Rates"
  Catholic, Evangelical, and Historically Black Protestant attrition mirror mainline attrition with 38 percent going to unaffiliated, and immigrant religious affiliation trends downward.

- Better Case Scenario: "Return to Gen X Rates"
  Switching rates return to what they were one generation ago (Gen X). This means: Evangelical attrition to unaffiliated returns to 18 percent, Catholic returns to 23 percent, mainline returns to 26 percent, historically black Protestant returns to 12 percent, and the unaffiliated attrition to Christianity returns to 48 percent.

AGE OF CHANGE

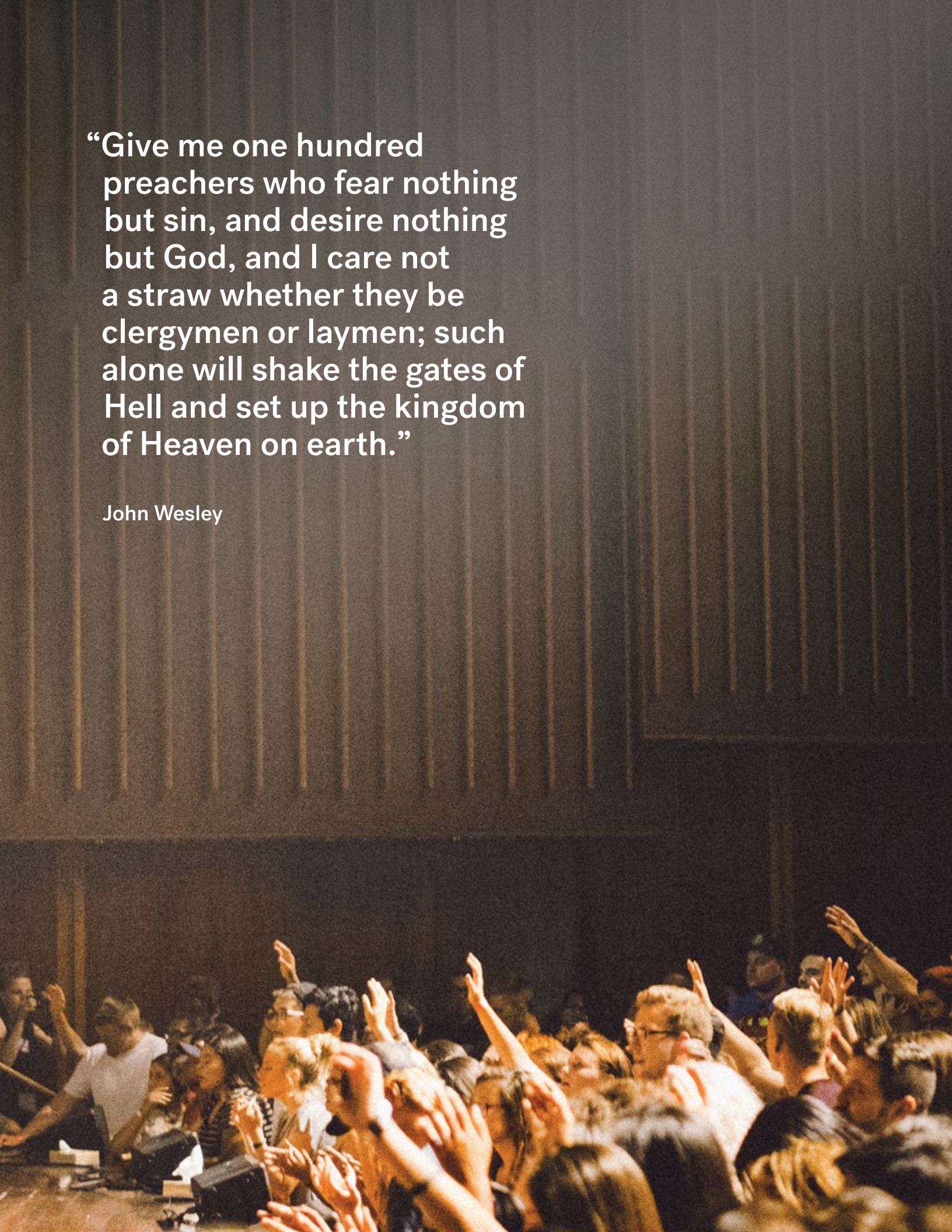


Source: Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S. (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, April 2009)

Chapter Two

Starting New Churches

The church is a community of people called out of this world into the light of God's love. More than a building, a set of creeds, or even an organizational structure, it is first and foremost a people who are brought together by God's grace for His purposes. Set apart, this community is meant to be so different from the world that in so doing it actually helps the world know it needs something else. It is God's vehicle for demonstrating His kingdom on this earth; God's means for worship, fellowship, the equipping of saints for the works of service, the preaching of His word.


“Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of Hell and set up the kingdom of Heaven on earth.”
John Wesley

“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Jesus

Churches are also the primary way the unaffiliated are introduced to Christ. As early as the Book of Acts, we see bodies of new believers reaching their neighborhoods in word and deed and sending out missionaries to plant new churches. Church planting today is arguably the single most effective evangelistic approach possible. For example, among church plants in America, recent research estimates that over 40 percent of each congregation, on average, is comprised of the unchurched or recently unchurched.[1] It is little communities, groups of Christians in neighborhoods and apartment buildings, who love the world as God did and introduce people to Jesus one by one.

Our contention through this chapter is that, while there is much that is good about the church's work in the United States, with the great missions opportunity in front of us over the next 30 years, we need a significant effort by every denomination, church network, and local church to plant new churches across the country. We need to double— ideally triple— our new church starts immediately and continue that for at least the next 30 years to meet the needs of the unaffiliated. Effectively, we need a return to the church planting rates that were common in the United States until the early 20th Century.

We need a return to the church planting rates that were common in the United States until the early 20th Century.

There are many reasons to be encouraged by today's church landscape in North America. There are an estimated 340,000 churches in America today: approximately 315,000 Protestant and 25,000 Catholic and Eastern Orthodox.[2] One hundred and seventeen million people, or 36 percent of Americans, indicate that they attend services each week.[3] Furthermore, we know from multiple sources that the churches that are growing and thriving are "high-cost" churches focused on substantive evangelism, discipleship, and formation.[4]

The average church in America gathers 186 people on a Sunday morning.[5] However, the median paints a slightly different picture, with only 75 people per Sunday morning.[6] This indicates that there is a distribution of churches weighted towards 75 in attendance and lower, with a long tail. More broadly, there is approximately one church per 680 self-identified Christians in America today.

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[1] http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2015/december/church-planting-2015-who-attends-what-attracted-lifeway.html

[2] The Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary (estimates based on the 2010 RCMS religious congregations census). See: http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#numcong

[3] http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/13/what-surveys-say-about-worship-attendance-and-why-some-stay-home/

[4] http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#numcong

[5] http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#sizecong

[6] Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy" David Millard Haskell, Kevin N. Flatt, Stephanie Burgoyne Review of Religious Research (2016) 58:515–541.

Four thousand new Protestant churches are planted each year, according to the most recent best estimates.[1] Those 4,000 include mainline denominations, historically black churches, independent evangelicals, and charismatic churches.[7] That may seem encouraging—and indeed it does reflect a commitment to church planting from many denominations, church movements, and networks. However, 3,700 churches also close each year.[1] The net number of new churches is therefore very small, with only 300 additional churches added in the U.S. per year. This is not remotely enough to keep pace with population growth, let alone to reach the increasing numbers of the unaffiliated.

As already mentioned, church plants are important for many reasons. New church plants on average are more effective at reaching the lost than long-established churches. Based on recent Lifeway research, we know that the average well-trained, equipped church plant will grow to an average of 250 weekly participants within four years.[8] Of those, 42 percent, or almost half of the congregation, will come from the previously unchurched—many of those the previously unaffiliated as well.[1] New church plants are perhaps the most effective method for reaching the unchurched.

[7] While certainly the best available data representing a broad cross-section of American Christianity, we believe that this likely undercounts immigrant churches, especially Latino and African charismatic churches. We think additional research would be valuable in this area. Since our model took a conservative view of immigration, we believe the net effect of these churches on the church planting need is not significant. If these churches multiply substantially and are able to break out of their initial immigrant communities as some argue they will, it would have a material impact on the church start needs.

[8] Ed Stetzer, *The State of Church Planting in the U.S. Research Report*, 2015

One Degree of Evangelism: Hellenized Jews and the Early Church

One of the interesting questions as we think about the rise of the unaffiliated is historical analogs. While not perfect, the comparison to Hellenized Jews is an intriguing one, and the response of the early church is instructive.

Large, ethnically Jewish communities existed throughout the Roman Empire, predominantly on the eastern half of the Mediterranean. These communities were betwixt and between; they were ostensibly Jewish, but also had adopted many of the attributes of the prevailing Roman culture. Most adopted the Greek language, had "taken Greek names, and intermarriage [with Gentiles] was frequent. All but a very few had so entirely lost their Hebrew that they worshipped in Greek and the Torah had to be translated into Greek. Many Diasporan Jews, probably the majority of them, had abandoned some provisions of the Law well before the arrival of Christianity."[9]

In this moment, Christianity arrived and was a spectacular success in taking root in the Jewish Diaspora. As Stark argues, and we think convincingly, Christianity grew first and fastest in those communities with large populations of Hellenized Jews. Paul was intentional in targeting communities with large Jewish populations (two thirds of all Roman cities with large Jewish populations were visited personally by Paul), and the other Hellenic Jewish cities all had large Christian churches by the end of the first century, while less than 20 percent of cities in the same geographies without large Jewish communities did. Simply, the early church was founded and formed in Hellenized Jewish communities.

Why? We believe it was for two reasons.

The first is the simplest: "The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew and also to the Greek." The early church was Jewish. Strategically it was focusing on spreading the Gospel, initially into their own communities beyond Judea.

Secondly, Christianity was even more successful to Jews outside Judea than those within because it offered a unique story to Jews in this moment of history who had lost their faith. It solved the riddle of the Law in the Roman Empire, while providing an ethical and spiritual narrative to make sense of the then modern world without compromising their uniquely Jewish identity or the primacy of Yahweh. Christianity was familiar to their childhood religion, and yet nonetheless new to them.

We think there are interesting analogs to the unaffiliated of our day. They have some cultural understanding of Christianity from their childhood and perhaps their social contexts, but struggle to make sense of it in a modern context. We are careful not to make the comparison too firmly—there were ethnic and stronger cultural affiliations in the first century Diaspora that are fundamentally different from today's Millennials—but in many ways the modern unaffiliated look like Hellenized Jews who have lost their faith in another century.

Just as Paul and the early church recognized that those who once knew God might be the most open to returning, we wonder what an apologetic and intentional evangelism effort targeting the unaffiliated who left the church might look like today.

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[9] See, Rodney Stark, Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome (New York: HarperCollins, 2006). Also see, Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: HarperOne, 1984); Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

4,000
churches start every year

3,700
churches close every year

42%
of average new congregation previously unchurched

Some denominations are doing remarkably well at church planting. For example, in 2015 the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) planted over 900 new congregations.[10] These plants are well trained and resourced, and it is estimated that 80 percent of SBC church plants still exist after five years.[11] SBC plants in 2012-13 saw an average of 7 percent growth, in contrast to a denomination-wide 0.86 percent average decline. These new churches are also reaching the lost. The SBC church planting class of 2010 reported one new baptism for every 13 members compared to 51 overall.[12] For instance, in Vermont (which Gallup found to be the least religious state in the country) 83 percent of SBC baptisms occurred in churches planted since 2010.[13]

Likewise, in urban centers there has been a significant wave of new plants. For example, there are currently 661 churches in the greater Boston area, or one church for every 1,200 people. That is twice the number of churches as there were 50 years ago, even though the overall population has declined 25 percent in that same period.[14] Hundreds of the churches are launched and anchored by new immigrants and ethnic minorities.

Furthermore, we have seen the emergence of church planting networks that cut across traditional denominational lines. Redeemer City to City, a New York City based church planting network, has planted nearly 400 churches in major global cities in the past 15 years. Many of these networks focus on planting what Ed Stetzer refers to as "viral churches"; churches that have multiplication in their DNA.

Church revitalization has been raised as a potential solution to complement planting. Revitalization has many expressions. If revitalization means bringing in new staff, members, and resources into an existing church, that looks very much like a church plant. In fact, it has been called "replanting" and can be very successful. For our purposes, we would consider that effectively a church plant.

Revitalization can also be a renewal of a declining congregation with the same leadership and members. That is a worthy mission for whom God calls, and we hope that all churches will be continuously renewing. While research is thin, what we have found suggests that success rates at scale of turning around a declining congregation is in the low double to single digits. Perhaps more effective models exist, but there seems to be a natural lifecycle for the majority of local congregations without a substantial infusion of new leaders, resources, and members.

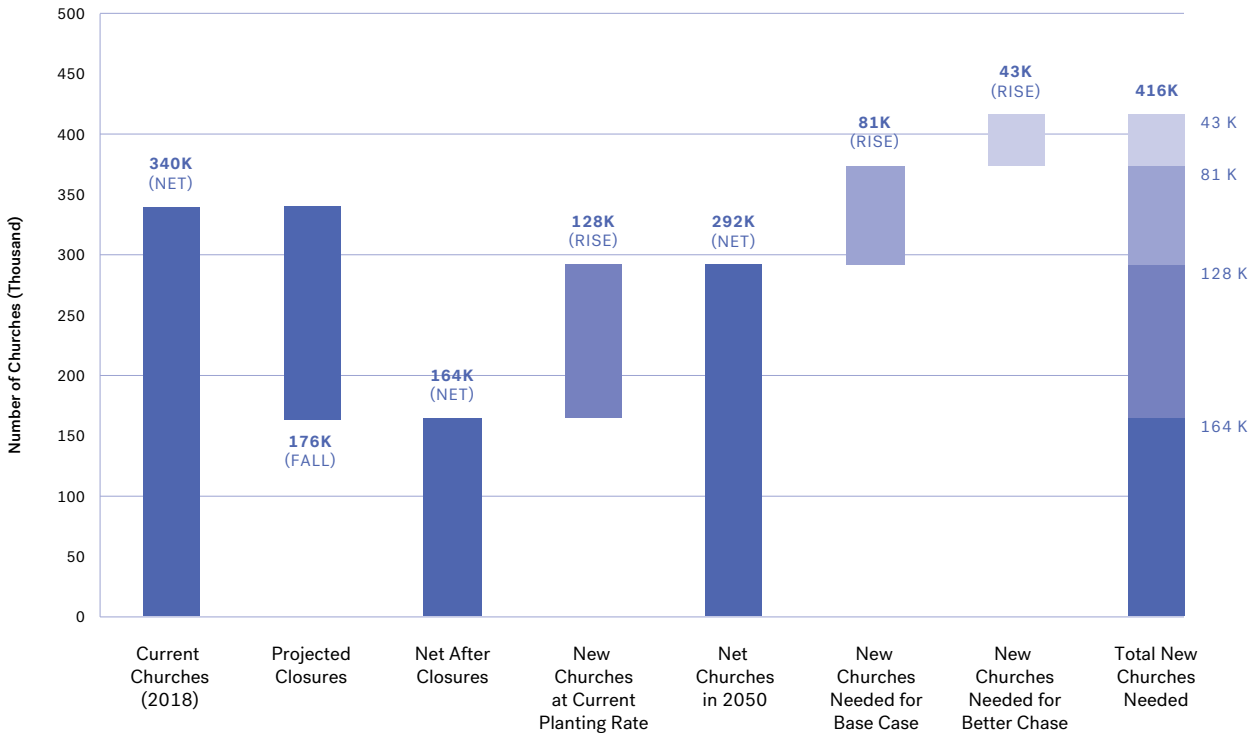
This does not mean that we are opposed to seeing efforts made to help older congregations grow; quite the contrary. We are encouraged by all these efforts. Given limited finances, time, and leadership, churches will have to make prudential judgements of how to steward those resources best for God's glory.

[10] http://willmcraney.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/SBC-Annual-Baptism-and-Plants-thru-2015.pdf
[11] https://www.namb.net/whatever-it-takes-blog/measuring-church-planting-success
[12] http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc16/newsroom/printfriendly.asp?ID=118
[13] https://sites.google.com/a/egc.org/newenglandsbookofacts/new-england-s-book-of-acts/section-one-overview/what-is-the-quiet-revival--why-is-it-important
[14] http://thomrainer.com/2015/05/three-types-of-church-revitalization-introducing-church-answers-monthly/

While there is much good to build on, the sobering reality is that we will need to double the annual rate of church planting from 4,000 new congregations to nearly 8,000 per year over the next 30 years.

Doubling the rate of church planting to nearly 8,000 new congregations per year would not represent a historic high water mark in new church plants. It would be the basic minimum needed in order to counter an anticipated increase in annual church closures and meet the needs of a growing population (both from new births and from average immigration levels). Additional churches are needed to try to stem the flow of the newly unaffiliated away from the church. To have enough churches for our base case scenario, we will need to plant an average of 6,500 churches per year, and to reach our better case scenario (with switching rates at Gen X levels), we will need to plant nearly 8,000 new churches per year.

NEW CHURCHES NEEDED BY 2050*



Key assumptions:
(1) New churches average a 68% success rate. (2) Ratio between churches and Christians stays at 1:680. (3) The US population grows to ~400M by 2050

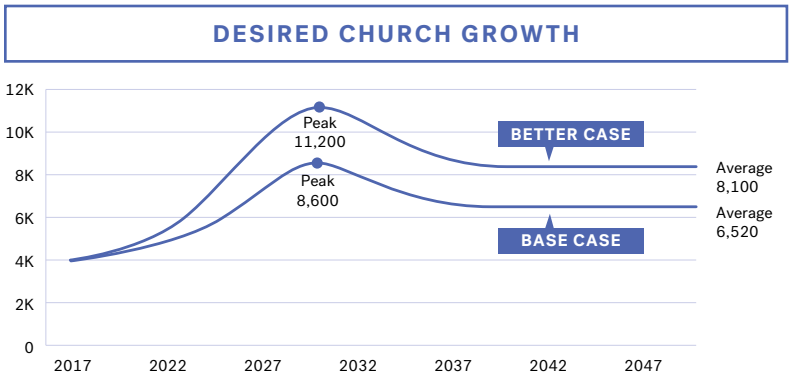
There are three reasons we will need to double the number of church plants each year over the next 30 years:

1. **To counteract an upcoming wave of older church closures**
   While churches currently close at a rate of 3,700 per year, we anticipate this rate will increase by 50 percent over the next three decades due to a wave of expiring churches founded in the post-World War II decade. Unfortunately, the churches planted during those years are just now reaching the average age for church closure. The increased rate at which the median church size is declining is indicative of this reality: there is a long tail of small churches in North America today on the verge of closure.

2. **To meet the needs of continued population growth**
   According to the most recent estimates, the U.S. population will hit 400 million by 2050, an increase of approximately 75 million people, or an average of two to three million new people per year. This is driven as much by birthrates as it is by immigration. We will need to significantly increase the net number of new churches each year simply to keep pace with population growth.

3. **To stem the rising tide of the unaffiliated**
   Finally, the rise of the unaffiliated, especially among the youth, presents an increased need for new churches to reach this growing population. Church planting is the single most effective strategy we know for reaching the lost and the previously affiliated.

Finally, we know that an increase in church planting will not happen overnight. A more likely scenario is a gradual ramp up as denominations and church planting networks accelerate new church starts. Therefore we believe that peak per year planting can and should reach from as high as 8,600 plants per year in a base case scenario to 11,200 plants per year in a more hopeful scenario designed to stem the tide of the unaffiliated. This means we should aim to nearly triple current rates in order to produce the total number of churches we need.



Exponential Church Planting in America: Methodists, Baptists, and African American Churches in the 19th Century

While a doubling or tripling of church planting rates may seem to be a remarkably high figure, it is actually much closer to the typical experience of American churches in the 19th century. Church planting was a common feature of the American church. The Methodists and Baptists, and later after the Civil War, African American churches, were each important in informing our understanding of rapid church expansion.

At the start of the 19th century, American Methodism was a rounding error in the American religious landscape. Despite the remarkable impact of disciples of Wesley in the mid-1700's like George Whitefield, it was not until the end of that century that Methodism took hold in earnest in the United States. "In 1776 the Methodists were a tiny religious society with only 65 churches scattered through the colonies... In 1850 there were 13,302 Methodist congregations, enrolling more than 2.6 million members—the largest single denomination, accounting for more than a third of all American church members."[15] These were not small churches either—the Methodists were averaging nearly 200 members per church.

Baptists saw similar growth. "[Baptists] claimed to have numbered 35,101 in 1784, to have grown to 65,345 by 1790, and then to 172,972 by 1810.[16] By 1850, they had grown to over 20 percent of all religious adherents (which was roughly two thirds the size of the Methodists), and bigger than Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists combined!

The same can be seen in African American churches after the Civil War. In less than 30 years after the Emancipation, over 2.7 million

[15] Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America*, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 55-116.
[16] Also see, John H. Wigger. *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005). Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America*, Chapter 3.

out of 8.5 million former slaves were Christian. One denomination, the American Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, tells this story. "From a modest 20,000 members at the beginning of the Civil War, the church had grown to nearly 400,000 by 1884, and to over 450,000 by 1896."[17]

How did these new entrants come to dominate American Christianity in a few decades? In each of these movements, the key was unlocking large numbers of church planters and missionaries that required few resources. With a message that emphasized repentance, a personal conversion experience, and strong formation through small group meetings, it was a powerful combination.

To recruit that many ministers, not one of the movements mentioned above required formal seminary education for new ministers during their high growth periods. They all recruited from the people groups that they were trying to reach. Most pastors "were bi-vocational, often entirely unremunerated."[18] In the AME Church, while the notion of an educated clergy was emphasized beginning in the mid-19th century—with educational efforts aimed at basic literacy and comprehension in fundamental subjects like geography, arithmetic, and history—it wasn't until the close of the century that Bishop Daniel A. Payne was able to establish a formal seminary. By that time, the denomination had already founded a number of colleges.[19]

For Methodists, the local "class presidents" were mentored by the circuit riders, who were in turn mentored by the Methodist bishops; Asbury himself was famous for his recruiting of Methodist ministers. The class leaders were probably closest in concept to today's small group leaders, though many also functioned at the local pastor. "'Many, if not most, of the early itinerants began their careers as class leaders.' As a result, the denomination remained responsive to the people despite its hierarchical structure, and the average Methodist congregation was a model of 'congregationalism,' with control residing in the hands of the adult membership."[20]

The Baptists were famous for their "farmer-preacher" model, recruiting gifted laymen to enter the ministry. In fact, if anyone wanted to preach, you had to be selected by your congregation; and, even if you were selected, in most cases the only way to find an open pulpit was to plant a new church! This created a strong supply of tested, apprenticed preachers who were eager to establish their new congregations.

During the Civil War, established AME clergy and church members in the North—often serving as chaplains accompanying Northern troops—moved into the collapsing states of the Confederacy to evangelize former slaves in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and Texas. This Southern missionary effort capitalized on the already-present slave plantation preachers (as well as black preachers authorized via white Methodist congregations) to launch AME churches in the South.[21]

The rapidly growing church movements also actively sought ways to reduce the resources required to reach the lost. The church planters had limited resources (the Methodists and Baptists often faced resistance from established churches who viewed them as competition, denying them access to facilities and advertising; the same impact was felt by former slaves across the country, even in the North). They used houses, barns, camps, and even saloons to get to the lost. Camp meetings were effective, and also less expensive. Church buildings came, but later. Pay was low—well below the established denominations—and most of the local leaders were unpaid volunteers. Itinerant preachers allowed the best preachers and teachers to scale while still grooming local talent. Between the innovation in facilities and low cost labor, these new denominations were able to quickly recruit, train, send, and support ministers into the field, fueling their growth.

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[17] C. Eric Lincoln & Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 47-75.

[18] Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

[19] Dennis C. Dickerson, *A Liberation Past: Explorations in A.M.E. Church History* (Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 2003); Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp. "The Church in the Southern Black Community" (http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/intro.html).

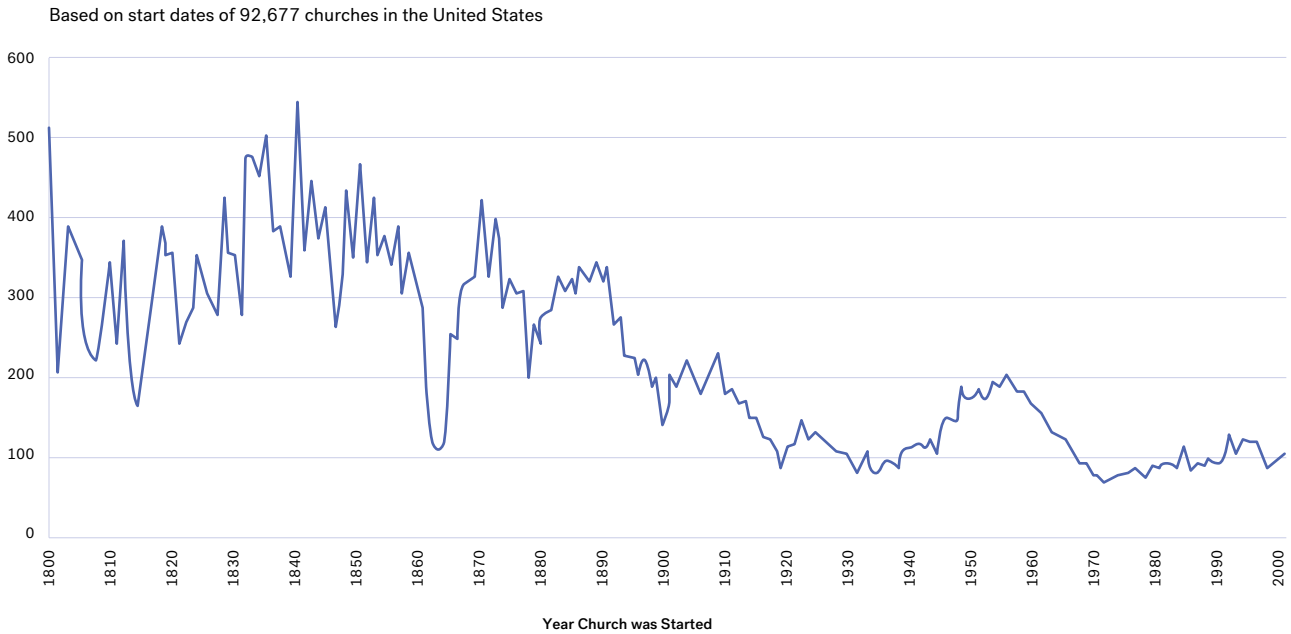
[20] Roger Finke, *The Churching of America*, as well as, John H. Wigger. *Taking Heaven by Storm.*

[21] Dennis C. Dickerson, "Our History" (https://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-history.

For those interested in digging into the numbers, here is a closer look at each of the three factors that will require a doubling of the annual church planting rate per year over the next 30 years:

1. **To counteract an upcoming wave of older church closures:** Last year 3,700 churches closed permanently. We anticipate that number will grow to at least 5,500 per year over the next 30 years. In total we anticipate 176,000 churches will close between today and 2050. This forecast is based on a few forces at work. First, the best research available indicates that the average lifespan of a church is 80 to 120 years from founding to closure. The churches that survive and thrive over 100 years are the exception rather than the norm. Second, 50 to 70 years ago there was a significant wave of church planting that took place post World War II. From 1940 to 1970 there was a 100 percent increase in the number of new church plants compared to the previous 30-year span, 1910 to 1940. Churches on the front end of that wave of planting in the '40s are now approaching 80 years old. Today, the average evangelical congregation is 64 years old and the average mainline congregation is 105 years old. Due to the predictable average church life cycle, the church closure rate can be expected to increase by an average of at least 50 percent for the next 30 years, to an overall average over the next 30 years of 5,500 per year. That is an increase of almost 2,000 closures per year above the current rate.

CHURCHES STARTED PER 1 MILLION RESIDENTS



Source: Dave Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*

2. **To meet the needs of continued population growth:** Overall population growth in the U.S. will in part counteract decreasing percentages of Christians. Today there are approximately 323 million Americans in the U.S., with 73 percent (236M) identifying as Christian. By 2050, the US population is projected to grow to 400 million, an increase of almost 75 million people.[22] Though the proportion of those who self-identify as Christian is projected to decline to 59 percent in a base case scenario, that will still require 347,000 churches in 2050.

3. **To stem the rising tide of the unaffiliated:** While baseline projections indicate that only 59 percent of the population will identify as Christian in 2050, we believe a more hopeful scenario is possible. Should Christian populations return to Gen X retention rates and the unaffiliated return to Gen X attrition rates, we could imagine 64 percent or more of the U.S. population identifying as Christian in 2050. In this scenario, we would need 380,000 churches, vs. 340,000 today, which will require 7,900 new plants per year.

Local Leadership

Equally as important is the nature of the church leadership we are developing. We cannot miss the fact that one of the salient features of the church in Acts was the raising up of local leaders across nationalities (Jew and Greek) and socioeconomic stations (rich and poor). As the church spread, local believers led new congregations. It is now a core principle of missions that foreign missionaries should quickly identify local leaders to take over the work for the long run—both for sustainability and for the edification of the global church.

We believe that investment should to be made to raise up leaders of all backgrounds to lead an increasingly diverse American church. As the world keeps coming to America, we are faced with a tremendous opportunity to manifest and strengthen the global church on this soil. To the watching ranks of the unaffiliated, we have the chance to concretely display a glimpse of heaven when people from every tongue, tribe, and nation worship before the throne.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2044 the U.S. will be majority minority.[23] Right now, for the first time in American history, half the primary school students are non-white. The U.S. church, which is more diverse than U.S. society as a whole, will be there sooner. For practical reasons alone, we must develop a broader leadership pipeline that is more reflective of society and

[22] http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/02/03/10-projections-for-the-global-population-in-2050/
[23] https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-tps16.html

our congregations. The American church needs the full wealth of capabilities provided by the tapestry of God's people. We know that the strongest organizations are those that harness the power of diverse skill and backgrounds to advance a common mission. Frankly, the challenges facing American Christianity are too significant not to cultivate all the talents God has given His body.

Most importantly, though, we believe a disproportionate effort is needed to cultivate minority leadership because God is glorified when His church reflects the diversity of His creation. The racial animus that has existed since our founding is, as Alan Jacobs says, "the massive wound at the heart of American life." The tensions of this sin that we have felt for 400 years continue today, flaring up in tragic ways. The church must model a different community, just as we model a life redeemed the original sin of the Fall. We believe that part of helping to heal this wound will be to lead together as one people. Millennials and Gen Z are more diverse than generations past, and the church must build with that future in mind.

As we explore church planting and leadership development, it will certainly mean intentional apprenticeship, active partnerships with unexpected allies, and specific efforts to cultivate voices that reflect the face of the church in the next 30 years.

Location, location, location

More church plants are needed almost everywhere in the United States. For some regions and locations, however, the need and challenge is *much* greater.

The South and Midwest are in relatively better health. The South benefits from one church for every 700 people and the Midwest one for every 800. The Northeast has only one church for every 1,200 people, while in the West there is only one for every 1,350 people.[24]

The geographic disparity is only increasing. Eleven percent of new churches are planted in the Northeast, despite its being home to 18 percent of the U.S. population. Twenty-one percent of plants are launched on the West Coast, though 24 percent of U.S. residents live there. Conversely, while the South is home to 38 percent of the U.S. population, 43 percent of new churches are started there. There are some obvious reasons for these disparities; regardless, more churches are needed everywhere. Unless we disproportionately increase church planting in the Northeast and West Coast, however, those differences will only worsen.[25]

11%
of new churches are planted in the Northeast, despite its being home to **18%** of the U.S. population.

21%
of plants are launched on the West Coast, though **24%** of U.S. residents live there.

43%
of new churches are started in the South while it is home to **38%** of the U.S. population.

[24] Dave Olson, *The American Church Research Project*. See: http://www.theamericanchurch.org/
[25] http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/FACTs%20on%20Growth%202010.pdf

The growth of cities, but enduring importance of suburban and rural areas, also creates unique opportunities and challenges for church planters. Thirty-seven percent of U.S. residents still live in unincorporated, rural areas where on average there are only 35 people per square mile. Another 17 percent live in towns of less than 25,000 people. As much as cities capture the public imagination, the majority of Americans still reside in small towns or the rural countryside.

The church planting challenges for unincorporated regions are legion. Catchment areas can cover 50 to 100 miles if not more. And average incomes in many rural regions can often be below the poverty rate. Increasing church planting rates in these areas will require more and more use of bivocational models and other cost savings adaptations.

Cities present their own unique opportunities as well. Urban centers are growing at two to five times faster than the overall population (2-4 percent growth per year compared to 0.8 percent for the national average). Young adults are driving that growth. Those 22 to 34 years of age have increased as a proportion of city dwellers, while declining everywhere else. This is the age range when most people's religious beliefs truly harden—the final years of opportunity. Young adults are often more open to questioning and exploring beliefs outside of their hometown.

Cities are also increasingly multiracial, presenting unique opportunities for Christ's church to represent the universality of the Gospel. Well over half of America's cities are now majority non-white. Primary cities in 58 metropolitan areas were "majority minority" in 2010, up from 43 in 2000.[26]

Challenges exist as well. The average cost of church planting is significantly greater than what it would be in a suburban or rural setting. Regardless of the cost, large available meeting spaces are often few and far between. Addressing the challenges of urban church planting will require significant work and innovation.

[26] https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/affluent-millennials-are-moving-into-inner-cities/

Recommendations

Doubling or tripling the rate of church planting from 4,000 new churches (net 300) to 8,000 or even 11,000 per year will require significant focus and new interventions on several fronts:

I. Vision casting to recruit and unleash more church planters of all backgrounds

II. Increasing and strengthening multi-platform and virtual training offerings for church planters

III. Investing in mixed-platform apprentice models

IV. Catalyzing the necessary funding for church planting

V. Investing in an online hub or app-based approach that pulls many of these pieces together to mobilize church planting

I. Vision casting to recruit and unleash more church planters of all backgrounds

We should launch a significant messaging push across denominations and church movements to raise awareness of the critical need for more church planters. This could include coordinated coverage in places like Christian media, church network conferences, and a range of denominational gatherings. We could imagine a nationwide day of prayer for new church planters, or similar nationwide prayer efforts. There was a substantial effort made in the first half of the 20th century for world missions across church organizations; we could imagine a similar effort made today.

To unleash more church planters we should also focus on calling and equipping church planters without a traditional three-year seminary. Using compelling case examples like the Methodists on the Western frontier or black church planting during Reconstruction, we should find ways to lower the barriers to entry and elevate church planting as an accessible aspiration for those without a full college education. Only one-third of Americans have a bachelor's degree, and less than 12 percent have an advanced degree. Not everyone is called to plant churches in San Francisco or Manhattan.

We must also make an intentional effort to increase the cultural and ethnic diversity of church planters to reach urban areas as discussed earlier, including partnerships between white Evangelical and Latino, African American, and Asian American churches.

As part of our vision casting, we want to shift the paradigm of success from establishing a single church to becoming a hub church that plants tens if not hundreds of other churches. We have no quarrel with large churches, small churches, or preference for a church of any size. We simply need more of them. Research

2x

Attendance of churches that plant other churches within their first five years compared to those that don't.

shows that churches which are hardwired to start new churches not only plant more churches but also are more successful themselves. New church plants that launch daughter churches within their first three to five years average twice as many weekly attenders compared to those that do not replicate (250 vs. 100 weekly participants on average after four years). Training for church planters and incentives from denominations and church planting networks should focus from day one on a multiplication strategy. Incentives could range from challenge grants to additional pastoral resources for churches that quickly become hub churches.

To launch more multiplying churches, we should also disproportionately focus church planting resources on hub or viral churches already engaged in planting, to provide targeted support and resourcing to accelerate their rate of planting. Denominations and networks like the Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God, Acts 29, Redeemer City to City, Soma, and Sojourners, amongst many others, are already heavily engaged in church planting. As we provide additional resources and tools for church planting, we should disproportionately come alongside these churches and networks to help them accelerate what is already working.

We should also see this work tied to more directly to evangelism, similar to the way Methodist circuit riders helped start churches in the early 1800s. We will unpack more on evangelism in Chapter 4.

II. Increasing and strengthening multi-platform and virtual training offerings for church planters

When new church planters receive at least a month of focused training on church planting from their denomination or church network, their long-term success rates double. On average, church planters with at least a month of basic training have almost 250 people attending services weekly four years later, compared to 120 attending services weekly for planters without training.[27]

The effectiveness of church planting training is not surprising. There are a number of best practices for church planters that consistently lead to better planting outcomes. For example, new churches meeting in public locations (e.g., school facilities) have double the weekly attendance after four years compared to churches meeting in less public spaces (e.g., dedicated church buildings). Or, for example, 71 percent of churches that hold new membership classes are financially self-sufficient within three years compared to only 53 percent for churches who do not hold membership classes.[27]

[27] Ed Stetzer, *The State of Church Planting in the U.S. Research Report*, 2015

We need to increase training and support while lowering barriers for church planters.

To significantly increase the number of planters who receive basic training, we need to partner with seminaries and church planting networks to develop and launch modular and just-in-time training that can be delivered across a variety of channels (e.g., online, live taught courses; online static material; in person classes; individualized coaching; etc.). Two complementary examples could include:

- Digital-first training platforms and modules (e.g., newchurches.com) that provide basic theological, ministry, and church planting training via interactive, digital platforms.

- Cross-denomination and network church planting boot camps. These boot camps would focus on planting basics such as building the launch team, bringing alignment and motivating the team, facility rental and set-up logistics, financial and back-office practices, youth discipleship in every area of church life, identifying your next church planter, or building a multiplying church movement.

Many church networks and denominations have created programs that are similar to the above. We believe, though, that more bi-vocational programs are needed, and that more investment is needed to provide a theologically comprehensive program without a three-year certificate. Additionally, some sort of quality standard for these programs would help ensure a minimum quality bar that would improve impact and avoid risk for participants. Graduates of these cross-platform models could receive a certificate that recognizes their mastery of the training provided, as well as enable them to participate in ongoing cohorts.

III. Investing in mixed-platform apprentice models

A related investment would focus on significant apprenticeship experiences for as many church planters as possible. Would-be planters could spend three to six months, if not longer, working alongside an existing church planter prior to launching their own church. Network hub churches could be well suited to disciple cohorts of apprentices, moving beyond scale limitations of the one-to-one mentorship model. One could imagine investing to increase apprenticeship programs quickly at top centers, helping experienced church planters have a wider impact.

Likewise, virtual apprenticeship or cohort models could match would-be planters with seasoned or retiring pastors for regular video-conference-based coaching and equipping. This could also

leverage the wave of baby boomer pastors who are now reaching retirement and deploy them for digital mentorship. It would only take a few thousand baby boomer pastors in their 70s who have planted churches of their own to mentor 15,000-20,000 church planters annually. We can imagine the creation of a matching network which would assess capabilities and personalities of mentors with those of church planters to create complementary apprenticeship models.

IV. Catalyzing the necessary funding for church planting

Doubling and tripling the rate of church planting will cost money. Today, only 68 percent of new church plants reach financial sustainability. Most church plants that do reach financial sustainability do so within four years. On average, the amount of outside funding a new plant needs to reach sustainability can range anywhere from $50,000 to $200,000-plus, depending on geography type of pastoral model. Therefore, to go from 4,000 plants a year to 8,000 or more successful church plants per year, the American church may need to mobilize as much as $800 million to $1.2 billion in additional funding for church planting per year. The good news is that that number is less than 2 percent of the estimated $70 billion that Americans give to religious causes per year. Said another way, that is about $3,000 per existing church. A sizeable but manageable figure.

Recommendations on how to significantly increase funding for new church plants, to as much as $1B-plus per year, include:

- Launch a crowdfunding model for new church plants, to which individuals and even churches can donate to. This could mobilize a “sponsor a church plant” model launched at scale. We believe the vast majority of additional church plant funding must come from local communities and existing congregations. This will also increase the sense of shared mission in a region. This is about giving to vision, not about paying the bills. We think connecting new churches’ impact back to the funding churches can do much to unlock new giving.

- Launch a matching funds program from institutional donors to provide matching grants to church planting hubs and congregations which increase their rates of church planting and multiplication.

- Start a REIT (or REITs) that purchases and holds properties ideally suited for church plants, whether convertible space like a bar or a theater, or church buildings. Given the wave of church closures, we should look into a REIT that buys highly valued properties from closing churches and redistributes them to church plants.

V. Investing in an online hub or app-based approach that pulls many of these pieces together to mobilize church planting

Many (though not all) of the challenges that confront church planters could be directly addressed via an online or app-based approach. An integrated online platform could include:

- A matching function that allows would-be planters to meet and recruit launch team families and members and vice versa. Churches and groups of people interested in launching a new church could register, along with would-be planters, to more effectively match planters with ideal locations and team members.

- A cohort-matching model that could link planters to peer groups of other planters, as well as to mentors and coaches (see Recommendation III).

- Peer-to-peer funding along the lines of Kickstarter or GoFundMe. Church planters would benefit from a fundraising platform designed to mobilize peer funders to planting needs.

- Geography and need mapping. The platform could provide basic church prevalence data by zip code or region, to help would-be-planters and movements better target the areas of greatest need.

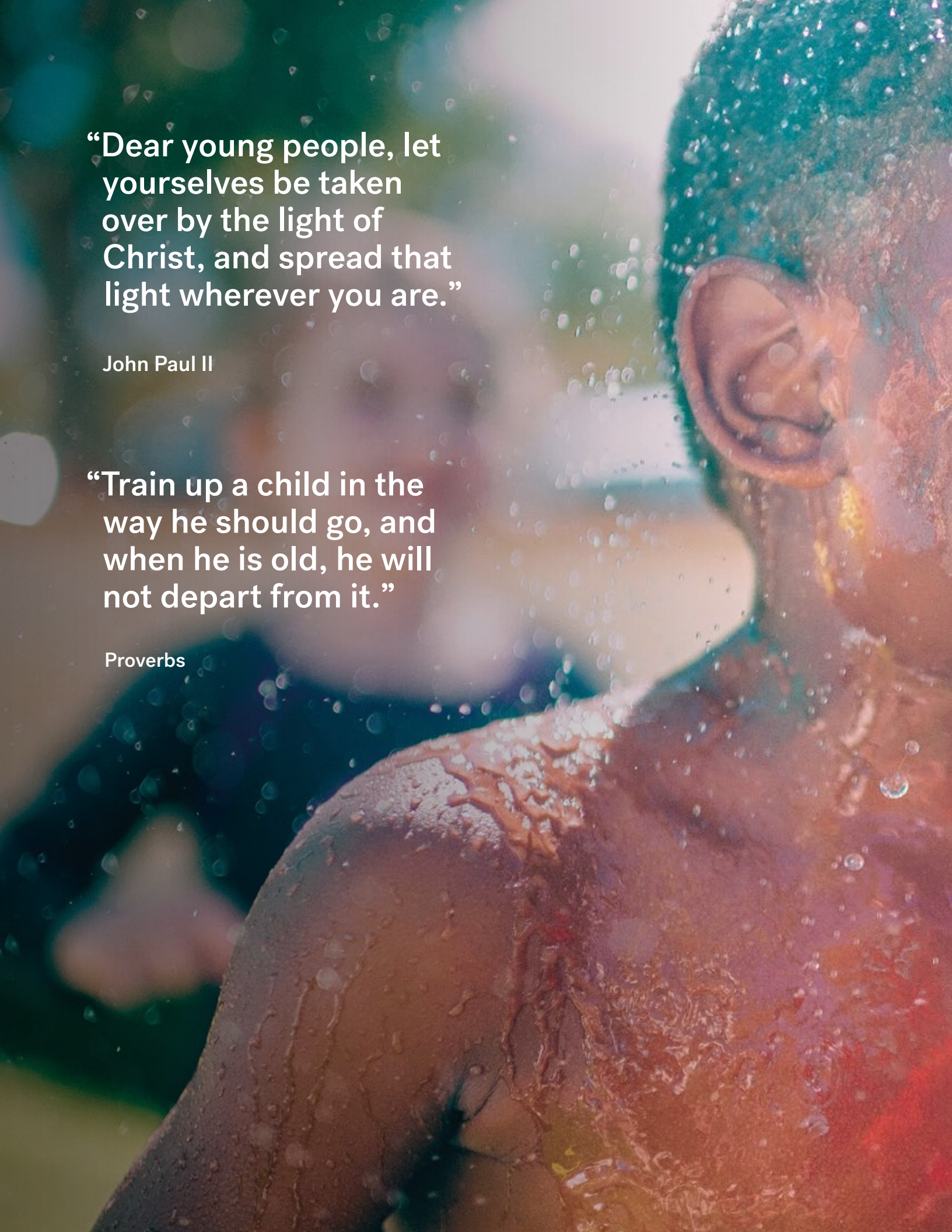
- A rich catalogue of just-in-time training modules on theology, preaching, pastoral ministry, and effective church planting models.

Chapter Three

Mission for Youth

The greatest missions opportunity in American history lies before us. It is in part this: to engage and retain children and youth in the church today who are poised to leave in record numbers. Using the base case discussed in Section 1 earlier, to return to the retention rates we saw just 20 years ago would mean at least 16 million more young people walking with Jesus.

These are not children of other faiths, atheism, or agnosticism. These are our children in our youth groups, attending our Christmas services, going to confirmation classes. They are families today that would call themselves Christian.

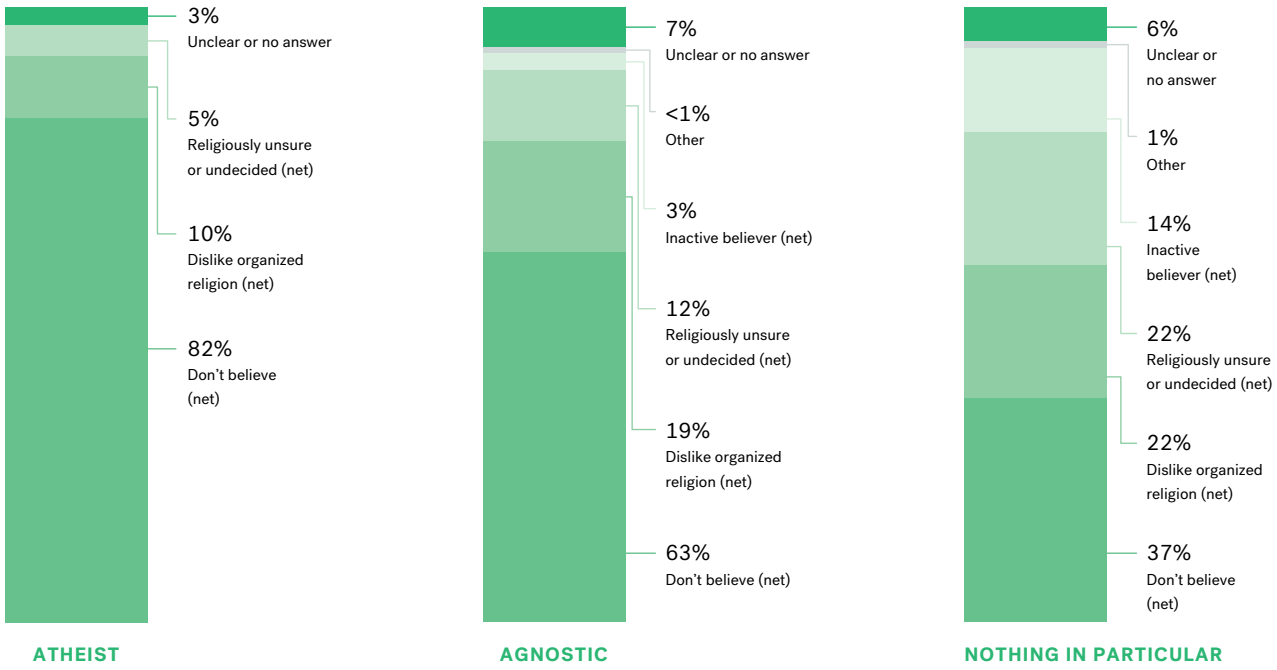

“Dear young people, let yourselves be taken over by the light of Christ, and spread that light wherever you are.”
John Paul II
“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”
Proverbs

This story is not about filling seats or affiliation numbers. It is about the 16 million more souls following Christ and the impact that they could have on the world. It's about a 21st-century church that is growing and flourishing because young people are experiencing the Gospel for themselves, reaching their peers, and seeking to mend a broken world. Historically, the church has often grown by the devotion and labors of the youth, making them both the largest missions opportunity and the largest missions resource. Our recommendations try to unlock this potential. We suggest innovations in youth ministry models that leverage the whole church for discipleship, equip families to walk together with Christ, and call youth to embrace new missions opportunities in a changing religious landscape.

The time to act is now. If past data is predictive, there is a very limited window of time in which we can influence religious affiliation. While God can move in anyone at any age, history and current research suggest that by the time someone reaches 35, her likelihood of returning to the faith is extremely low (see sidebar in Chapter 1).

This is about 16 million more souls following Christ and the impact they could have on the world.

REASONS FOR DISAFFILIATION AMONG THOSE WHO WERE RAISED IN A RELIGION



Note: Excludes those who said they had been misclassified and were still affiliated with a religion.
Figures do not sum to 100% or to subtotals indicated because multiple responses were permitted.
Source: 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study recontact survey conducted March 17-May 6, 2015. QC13. "Choosing a New Church or House of Worship" Pew Research Center

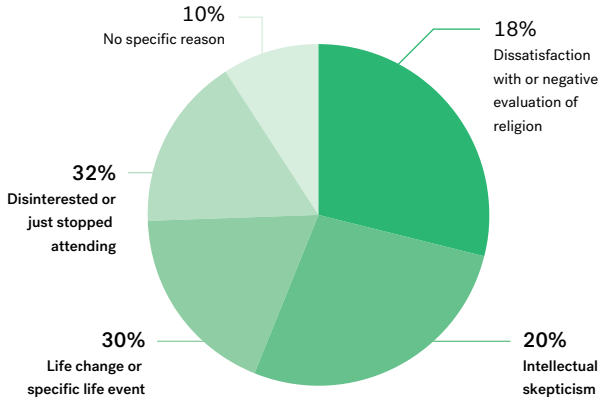
Too many young people don't think a life with Jesus is worth their time.

There is no singular reason that youth are leaving the church in record numbers. While there are many important reasons that have been explored elsewhere,[1] we think perhaps the most striking is that the largest cohort of disaffiliating youth are simply slipping away. According to Pew's recontact survey after the 2014 Religious Landscape Study, which probed motivations for disaffiliation, a minority of the recently disaffiliated cited a change in belief. The majority of the disaffiliated did not go through a crisis of faith or abandon the teachings of the church. Rather, they seemingly lost interest and drifted away. According to Pew data, the largest gains for Millennials are among the "nothing in particular" category—those who are most likely spiritual, and sometimes religious, but have stopped practicing. Other data sources confirm this insight. The landmark *National Study of Youth Religion* (NSYR) found that only 20 percent of youth who "became less religious" did so because of a change of intellectual belief. A full 42 percent cited "disinterested or just stopped attending" or "no specific reason" for their decrease in religious practice.[2] David Kinnaman of the Barna Group drew nationwide attention to this observation in his 2011 book *You Lost Me*, which draws on Barna research to show how record numbers of youth see religion as irrelevant to their lives. All these sources confirm the same diagnosis: young people don't think a life with Jesus is worth their time.

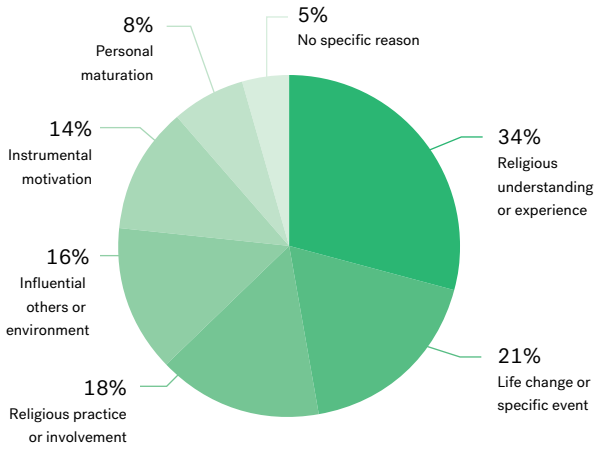
[1] There is an emerging strong body of work in this area, including *Soul Searching*, *Lost in Transition*, and *Young Catholic America* by Christian Smith; *Almost Christian* by Kenda Creasy Dean; *Sticky Faith* by Kara Powell and Chap Clark; *You Lost Me* by David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, and many more.

[2] Melinda L.Denton, Lisa D. Pearce, Christian Smith, "Religion and Spirituality on the Path Through Adolescence: A Research Report of the National Study on Youth and Religion: Number 8" (2008).

WHY YOUTH BECOME LESS RELIGIOUS



WHY YOUTH BECOME MORE RELIGIOUS



Source: NSYR Study

The Tinder of the Great Awakening: Jonathan Edwards and Youth

Jonathan Edwards is well known for being one of the most influential church leaders in American history; his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is still required reading for many students today. However, early in his ministry he was a struggling local pastor. In 1727, at age 26, he took his first pastorship at Northampton in western Massachusetts. He was coming off of a three-year period of depression, was chronically ill, recently married, and his grandfather (who was the senior pastor of the church) had just passed away!

In the midst of all his personal struggles, Edwards felt impotent in front his congregation. Calling his parishioners "sermon proof," he decried that "just after my grandfather's death, it seemed to be a time of extraordinary dullness in religion: licentiousness for some years greatly prevailed among the youth of the town."[3] For nearly six years, he kept at this theme. His sermons reflected a great concern for the young people of Northampton, despite being only a few years older than many of them.

By 1733 something was changing. "Edwards began to notice that the congregation's young people had adopted a new 'flexibleness' in their attitude towards his preaching.... Edwards began encouraging dismayed young people to organize into small group meetings." In 1734, the revival was in full swing. Hundreds of young people dedicated their lives to Christ, and "what had begun as a movement of God among young people became universal, and everyone, young and old, seemed to talk only of religion."[4] Within another year, dozens of other communities were seeing similar effects, and Edwards was on his way to becoming one of the great preachers of the American church.

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[3] See, George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

[4] See, Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

EPIC

The practical cause of disaffiliation is that their understanding of the person of Jesus from their childhood and teen years was not sufficient to keep them in relationship with Him into adulthood. But the unaffiliated are, by and large, positive towards religion in general. They are open to religious beliefs and may even pray on occasion. They are not an embittered, angry generation shaking their fists at the heavens. They just don't think looking up is all that important.

This is not to say that there are not some important issues in particular that have created disaffiliation. Scandals, particular identification with political parties or leaders, social issues, and more have certainly contributed to the matter. These are real, and many have written on the subject. We think focusing on the church's central mission of evangelism, discipleship, and care for the poor will help greatly, as some of these other issues can be, at times, distractions from mission. But our contention is by and large that these issues are symptoms, rather than causes, of disaffiliation. It is indifference in the main, not anger.

We have been particularly compelled by the work of Smith, Dean, and others from the seminal work in the NSYR. There are religious communities which are out of step with particular current social trends or norms, and they are able to successfully form their youth. Mormon youth, for example, on average demonstrate much higher competency and fluency in their understanding of faith. Why? There are three major factors: highly engaged parents who care for their own faith and the faith of their children; other adults actively supporting youth in their walk with God; and calling youth into mission. For parents and churches, it is very clear: "You get who you are."

Although the oldest members of Generation Z (born 1995-present) are just now hitting college, we know several things about them. They are the largest generation in U.S. history, already constituting 25.9 percent of the U.S. population, and still growing. Some projections have Gen Z growing to a full one-third of the U.S. population by 2020.[5] By comparison, Millennials currently constitute 24.5 percent and Baby Boomers only 23.6 percent. Gen Z is also the most racially diverse generation in U.S. history, comprised of nearly 47 percent non-whites. This has caused some commentators to call them the "Plurals." Called by others the "iGeneration," Gen Z spends an average of nine hours a day on social media and 96 percent have a smartphone.[6] On social issues, equality is a driving force: 73 percent say people should be able to marry whomever they like, regardless of sexual orientation.[7] Gen Z is growing up in a very different world than even Millennials.

26%

Generation Z is the largest generation in U.S. history, already constituting 26 percent of the U.S. population, and still growing.

47%

Gen Z is also the most racially diverse generation in U.S. history, comprised of nearly 47 percent non-whites.

58%

likelihood that Evangelical Gen Z youth will stay in their faith

[5] http://www.ideasindigital.com/step-aside-millennials-gen-z-has-arrived/
[6] http://mediakix.com/2017/03/the-generation-z-statistics-you-should-know/
[7] http://news.northeastern.edu/2014/11/generation-z-survey/

The need for intentional, costly discipleship for children and youth from an early age has never been greater. New cultural pressures continue to widen the gap between daily American life and biblically reinforced orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Long gone are the days when Christians represented 80-90 percent of mainstream culture. This can hopefully be seen as a significant opportunity for the power and distinctiveness of the Gospel to shine forth, but it does require a higher degree of intentionality. Likewise, conceptions of the family and human identity continue to be redefined. Youth, even of elementary school ages, must navigate a world of self-defined identities, requiring a depth of discernment and cultural apologetics that previous generations have not faced.

Across many different research projects, studies have found that the most important driver of retention is actually pretty simple: actively engaging youth into a full life with Jesus in their family and church. It turns out that being in a family and church that talks with Jesus— where they actively evangelize, serve together, know other adults that take their faith seriously, and live the Gospel and not sin management— will more often than not produce young people who want to continue on in a life with God. Churches that maintain historic orthodoxy and a missional posture are the ones most likely to grow and retain their youth.[8] The results are both dramatic and encouraging when parents and churches intentionally disciple their youth in the historic, core practices of the church.[9]

Surprisingly, one of the least impactful factors on substantial faith was a teen's peers. It is the adults in their lives that ended up having the most impact, contrary to what we may think of teen culture. The

[8] "Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy" David Millard Haskell, Kevin N. Flatt, Stephanie Burgoyne Review of Religious Research (2016) 58:515–541.

[9] For excellent research that further unpacks these findings, see *Sticky Faith* and *Growing Young* by Kara Powell at the Fuller Youth Institute.

most requested place of support by teenagers in their spiritual walk? To actively participate in the life of the church. The Epistles are replete with verses talking about the relationships between older and younger believers, because the community itself was multi-generational.

The current youth ministry model is a relatively recent invention, growing out of a response to the post-World War II youth culture. Crusade, YWAM, FCA, and other para-church ministries were very effective, and the ministers from those organizations took the models into the local church as youth leaders and pastors. There is much to be said for this model; all the writers of this report were actively involved in church-based youth groups during their teen years and consider it critical to their formation.

However, we are learning from the data that a youth-group model as the *primary* means of forming young people in a culture that is increasingly at odds with the Gospel is not enough. What *does* work is actively serving together on missions (domestic and foreign), active training in what following Jesus means, and serving alongside other adults in the church.[10]

The real opportunity for youth formation is much greater than 16 million followers of Jesus in our churches. It is the impact that these young leaders can have on our society and the world. At multiple points in history, revival has come to the church through her youth. Five Williams College students started discussing missions when a thunderstorm forced them to take refuge under a haystack. After the skies cleared, the five committed themselves to world missions. Within six years, they had created the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and sent their first missionary to India. Over 200 years and thousands of missionaries later, the ABCFM still sends missionaries around the world and is credited with starting the modern missions movement in America. We believe that youth should not just be viewed as a cohort to retain within the church, but as the potential present source of revival and growth amongst the church and beyond.

How can institutional church leaders and funders help foster a significant shift in youth retention within the church? Prayer is the foundation. Only God's sovereign action can truly change hearts and minds, and so prayer is our first action.

The real opportunity for youth formation is the impact that these young leaders can have on our society and the world.

[10] One of the authors was particularly inspired by an anecdote in the wonderful book by Kendra Dean called *Almost Christian;* in it, Dean talked about the high retention rates of Mormons. In particular, Mormon youth have to actively participate in evangelistic missions, and there is a morning catechism class taught to teens by parents at 6 a.m.! As a result, his whole family just completed a church missions trip in Mexico with four children ages 5 to 11, with several other families and Sunday school teachers. As part of the trip, the two older boys (11 and 9) offered to give their testimonies in street-level outreaches in front of dozens of local kids. Over 30 children and teens gave their life to Christ at that outreach; the author's children are asking to return next year.

A High Bar for a Deep Foundation: Catechism in the Early Church

If a Christian from the early church, say the second or third century, were to observe an average Evangelical church in America today, one of the most striking differences (besides the obvious cultural differences) would be the spiritual formation of its members.[11]

Formation, by which we mean the *apprenticing* of new believers into a life with Jesus, was one of the most central and dominant themes of the early church. Church fathers like Hippo, Tertullian, and Augustine wrote extensively on the subject. It was often discussed in church councils and a matter of great debate. Why? Because Christians were ambassadors of Jesus, reflections of Him in a culture that did not know who He was, and to know how to live like Christ wasn't something easily learned.

Formation, to the early church, was a three-year process with regular scripture study, doctrinal training, moral instruction, and spiritual counseling culminating in a baptismal admission into formal church membership. The length was due to many factors, not the least of which was new church members had little religious context (they were not God-fearing Jews) and needed a long period to invest in learning what it meant to follow Jesus in a world that didn't agree with Christian doctrine. Without it, the church would have struggled to have a distinctive witness. Cyril of Jerusalem, a bishop in the fourth century, said, "Let me compare the catechizing to a building. Unless we methodically bind and join the whole structure together, we shall have leaks and dry rot, and all our previous exertions will be wasted."

It was critical in a culture which did not understand the Gospel to shape new converts well such that the church truly acted as the body of Christ.

New converts had deep scriptural study under the tutelage of the pastors, with surveys of the entire Bible, daily readings, and exposition. In an oral culture, there was a regular recitation and memorization of creeds and confessions. There were explicit renunciations of conduct that was sinful or incompatible with the Christian faith. There was even spiritual counseling that would be consistent with charismatic and Pentecostal traditions today.

What is striking about the early church is the effort paid to the spiritual formation of new believers. We believe that there is much that can be learned from the holistic catechesis of the early church in the formation of our youth and young adults. The intentional effort paid to teaching doctrine, engaging moral formation in a culture that would instruct otherwise, and confessional practices to cement their decisions are all translatable into our context. What would a more extensive formation practice look like today?

[11] For an excellent and important summary of the early church's approach to Catechesis and implications for the modern church, see the Presidential Address by Clinton Arnold (President of the Talbot Seminary and past president of the Evangelical Theological Society) to the ETS in 2003, found at http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/47/47-1/47-1-pp039-054_JETS.pdf Also, see, Justo Gonzalez, The Story of Christianity, Volume 1

Recommendations

In addition to prayer, we believe four types of interventions are needed, specifically:

I. Equip and mobilize whole churches to foster youth formation

II. Provide parents with tools for teaching their children

III. Equip and send youth into missions

IV. Build a national advocacy movement for youth formation

I. Equip and mobilize the whole church to foster youth formation

Youth ministry today is often based on age-stage models. A dedicated youth pastor gathers middle and high school youth together into their own largely independent church experience and community. The youth church conducts their own worship services, Bible studies, and gatherings. Parents often peer in from the outside, unsure of their role, if any. Some of this is healthy and good, as youth grow in independence in their journey to adulthood. However, there are limits too. Often, this model defines youth formation as one ministry among others, the responsibility of a few professional staff rather than a core responsibility of the whole church. Critical opportunities for youth formation are missed when youth are not integrated into the fabric of the church, encouraged in their faith by multiple adults, and given opportunities to lead in corporate worship and missions.

The categorization of "youth" is not limited to those of high school age. Formation continues well into young adulthood, with increasing emphasis placed in our society on post-secondary education. Currently only 1,174 college campuses with populations of 1,000 or more have campus ministries, while 1,826 campuses with similar populations do not. We are encouraged by the collaboration of ministries like Intervarsity and Cru to partner together to reach these unreached campuses which are educating millions of students.[12]

We specifically think interventions along these lines would be fruitful:

[12]Intervarsity Christian Fellowship interviews; http://everycampus.us

- A challenge grant or X Prize model for church leaders (including youth!) who pilot new, scalable programming that incorporate youth as integral participants, alongside adults, in multiple areas of the church's core ministry. Winning programs would create sustainable, multi-generational models. Prize recipients would demonstrate positive youth formation as well as the potential to scale to other churches via church networks (e.g., the small group movement in the 1970s or the Alpha Course, more recently). An effect of this grant would be to create an innovative community around youth formation and open avenues of communication to share best practices.

- Develop church-wide, scalable mentorship programs as part of the core discipleship expectations of members. Similar to the way most churches encourage members to participate in a community group as the basic building block of Christian fellowship, each member could be encouraged to mentor at least one youth as the basic building block of discipleship. The goal would be for each youth to have at least three to five adult mentors.

- Develop seminary, pastoral training, and new members programming that teaches youth formation as a central mission of the church and provides best practices for shaping youth through involvement across church life. This curriculum, sharable across church networks, would clearly articulate the importance of the entire local church discipling their youth.

- Develop replicable outreach models for para-church or church based organizations to scale out to the thousands of state, vocational, technical, and community college students. It would combine many of the best practices for youth and adult formation to call these young leaders into an ongoing walk with Christ.

II. Provide parents with tools for teaching their children

Perhaps the most important insight for youth formation is this: parents get who they are. If parents model an authentic, Jesus-centered life of grace and truth, and invite their children to grow in faith alongside them, it is likely that their children will follow. Doing this well with intentionality, however, is challenging. It is even more difficult when parents feel their own faith foundation needs help or is in the early phases of formation. In our view, most parents want to help their child's faith grow, but lack the resources and confidence to do this well. We think several interventions could be helpful, including:

- Resources that make catechetical questions easy to incorporate into dinner time conversations and free time. The best resources would be gamified and made user-friendly via apps so devotional knowledge is fun, accessible, and even potentially competitive. Games like this would reduce the amount of preparation and advance knowledge required of parents and create a "learning together" atmosphere.

- Publishers and seminaries should continue to develop and refine tailored resources for parents to use directly for family-based youth formation, including Redeemer's New City Catechism (perhaps simplified further for children), Axis.org's training for parents, and other similar resources. The best materials would be tailored for small group contexts so cohorts of parents could go through the material together and share best practices.

- Short-term missions agencies and local community-based outreach programs should develop family-based volunteer models, where children, parents, and even grandparents work side-by-side to serve the least among us and preach the Gospel.

III. Equip and send youth into missions

Sometimes the best defense is a good offense. We believe that part of the way one is discipled is by making disciples. As was discussed earlier, today's youth hold the greatest promise for reaching the next generation with the Gospel. Historically, great movements of faith have been catalyzed by mission-minded youth. In many cases, the very act of moving out in faith creates the context for faith to be strengthened and confirmed. It is our desire to see the next generation mobilized for missions for the sake of those both inside and outside the church.

- Encourage youth into missional life in the church directly. There are literally millions of stories of young people whose faith was strengthened when they began to evangelize, teach, and lead themselves. Alpha International has seen tremendous success with their Youth Series, which has substantially lowered the barriers for young people to discuss faith with their peers. In fact, the model has thrived, with young people, who were only recently invited to the discussions, becoming Christians and then immediately leading Alpha themselves!

- Creation of a gap-year program prior to or during college that emphasizes cross-cultural evangelism or integration into a church plant. Priority could be placed on underserved areas using a matching model like Teach for America did with schools. The church intern would help the church planting pastor reach out to unaffiliated youth and create an integrated youth ministry model for the new church. They would also experience first-

We need the whole church body to call the next generation into the mission of Christ by living that mission with them.

hand the life of a church planter, at a minimum helping them understand the work of church-based ministry as they move into their own vocations.

- Creation of missional service programs, potentially with national branding, that can be sponsored by particular churches and driven by youth.

- Active integration of young people into the missions leadership of the church. Creating a highly participatory culture, with youth actively serving in the mission of the church, is a tremendous way to help keep youth engaged. This may mean shifting the age-stage model on Sundays and elsewhere, so that youth are active in the work and service of the church rather than isolated in a youth church service. It can also mean engaging younger people in leadership, particularly in missions; imagine having young people own the digital outreach of the church. Prizes, case studies, and materials could all be developed to highlight effective practices here.

IV. Build a national advocacy movement for youth formation

Reversing the tide of one million youth leaving the church per year is the most significant domestic evangelism challenge in American history. Rising to this challenge will require churches, denominations, seminaries, and in particular, parents and pastors working together intentionally. Movements like this have swept the American church in the past. One thinks immediately of the modern missions movement in the early 19th century and, more recently, the small group movement in the 1970s.

To meet this challenge, a diverse group of church and philanthropic leaders should launch a "Youth Formation" advocacy movement. Every Evangelical, mainline, and Catholic church should be aware and focused on integrating the youth in their midst into the life of the church and mobilizing youth for missions. All adults in the church, whether or not they have children, should be aware of the impact they have on the next generation and be committed to supporting them.

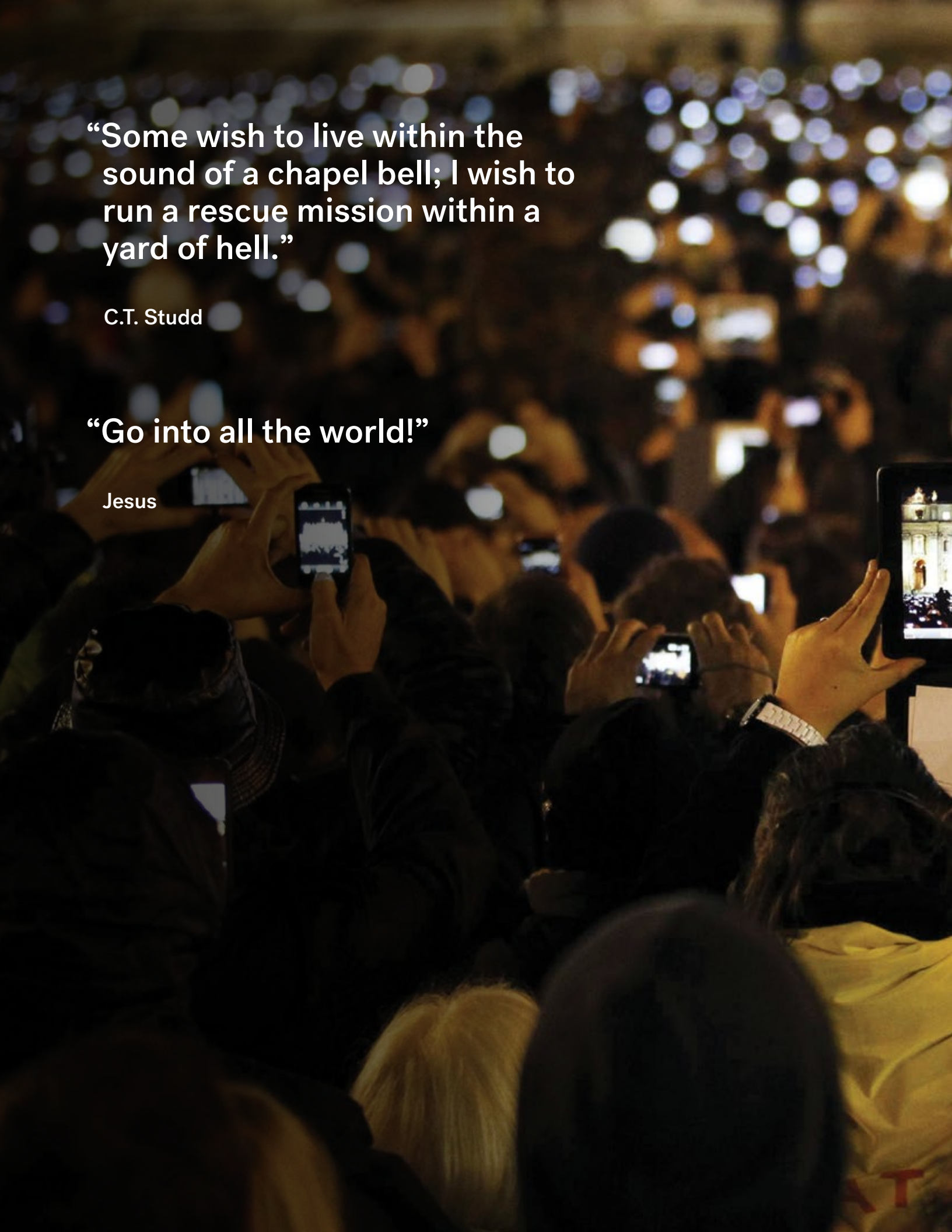
Improving the quality of our youth formation is perhaps the greatest challenge the church faces today. We need the whole church body to call the next generation into the mission of Christ by living that mission with them. We must help young people engage with Christ and His church in a way that makes them want to continue with Jesus for the rest of their lives, and in so doing, reach generations to come.

Chapter Four

Reaching New Audiences in a Digital Age

At the very core of Christianity is good news for all people.

In the ancient world, Christianity stood apart as a religious movement advanced not by personal charisma or coercion but by the sharing of an announcement—Christ's death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins—that transformed the individuals who heard and believed. Not surprisingly, among the earliest priorities of Christ's followers was the transcription of this news for fast and broad distribution—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.



“Some wish to live within the sound of a chapel bell; I wish to run a rescue mission within a yard of hell.”

C.T. Studd

“Go into all the world!”

Jesus

This heartbeat to share the good news has motivated Christians to embrace, and often pioneer, innovations in media. In the 16th century, Martin Luther leveraged nascent printing technologies to create pamphlets, woodcuts, and tracts that got the Gospel message into the hands of millions across Europe, fueling the Reformation.[1] In 18th-century America, famed preacher George Whitefield leveraged Benjamin Franklin's new media empire to organize revival meetings and disseminate sermon copies to millions throughout the Western world, fueling the First Great Awakening.[2] In the 20th century, Billy Graham pioneered TV and radio programming to reach a live audience of over 200 million people and hundreds of millions more around the world, fueling the modern evangelistic crusade.[3]

Historically, Christians have not only leveraged new media, but pioneered new media in order that every person may hear the message of Christ.

We believe today's media landscape provides tremendous opportunities for the Gospel message to reach the unaffiliated. But we must invest in the people, pipelines, and platforms to make this happen. We want to create a world-class web domain that provides Christianity's best answers to common questions the unaffiliated are asking about God, a studio that produces sharable multimedia content targeted at the unaffiliated, resources for Christian leaders and local churches to engage their neighborhoods online, and leadership pipelines that will discover and support the digital Martin Luthers, George Whitefields, and Billy Grahams.

It will surprise no one to learn that we are in the midst of the greatest media revolution the world has yet seen. Each day, over 1.2 billion people—or a seventh of the world population—visit the same social media platform and spend an average of 20 minutes there. What is more, over two billion people are active on this website at least once a month. Among those aged 18-24, almost 50 percent check this site immediately when they wake up in the morning, and 80 percent of American teens have a profile here.[4] Of course, we are talking about Facebook, one platform in what is likely still the beginning of the digital media revolution.

Via Facebook alone, it is possible to instantaneously communicate with nearly 30 percent of the world's population.

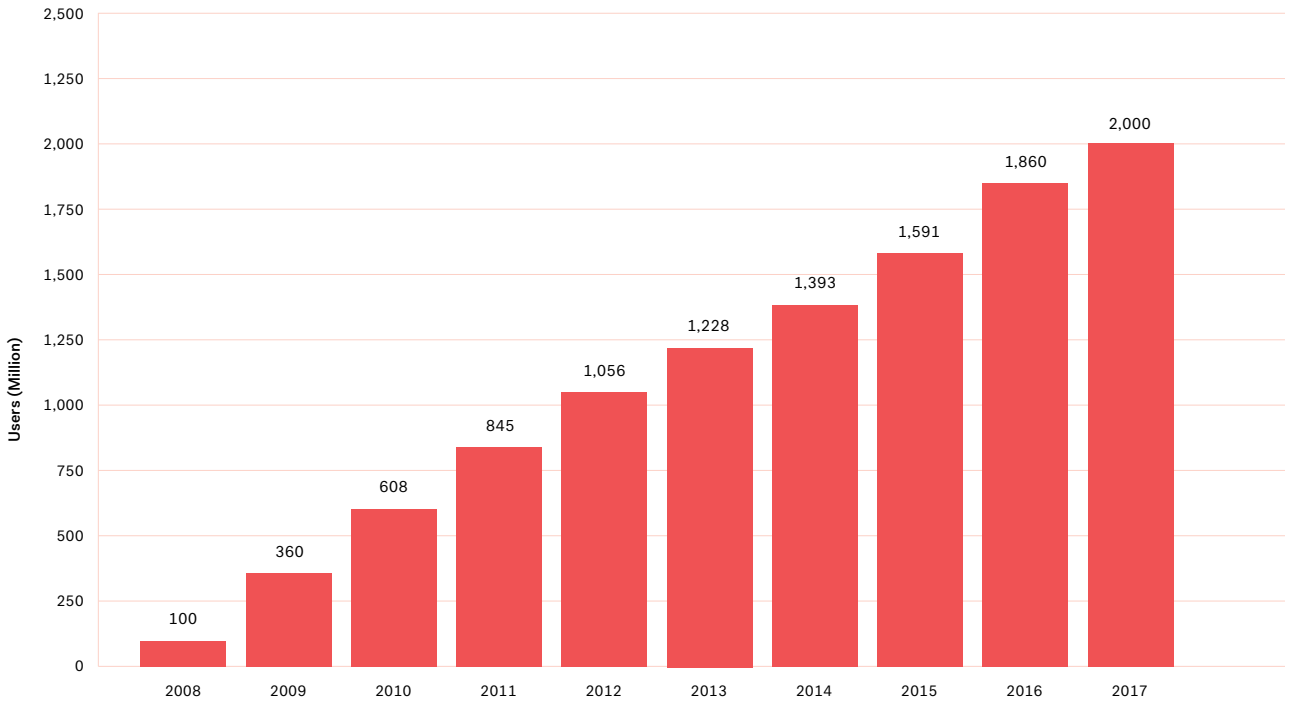
1.2 billion
people visit Facebook in a single day and spend an average of 20 minutes there

50%
Among those aged 18-24, almost 50% check Facebook immediately when they wake up in the morning, and 80% of American teens have a profile

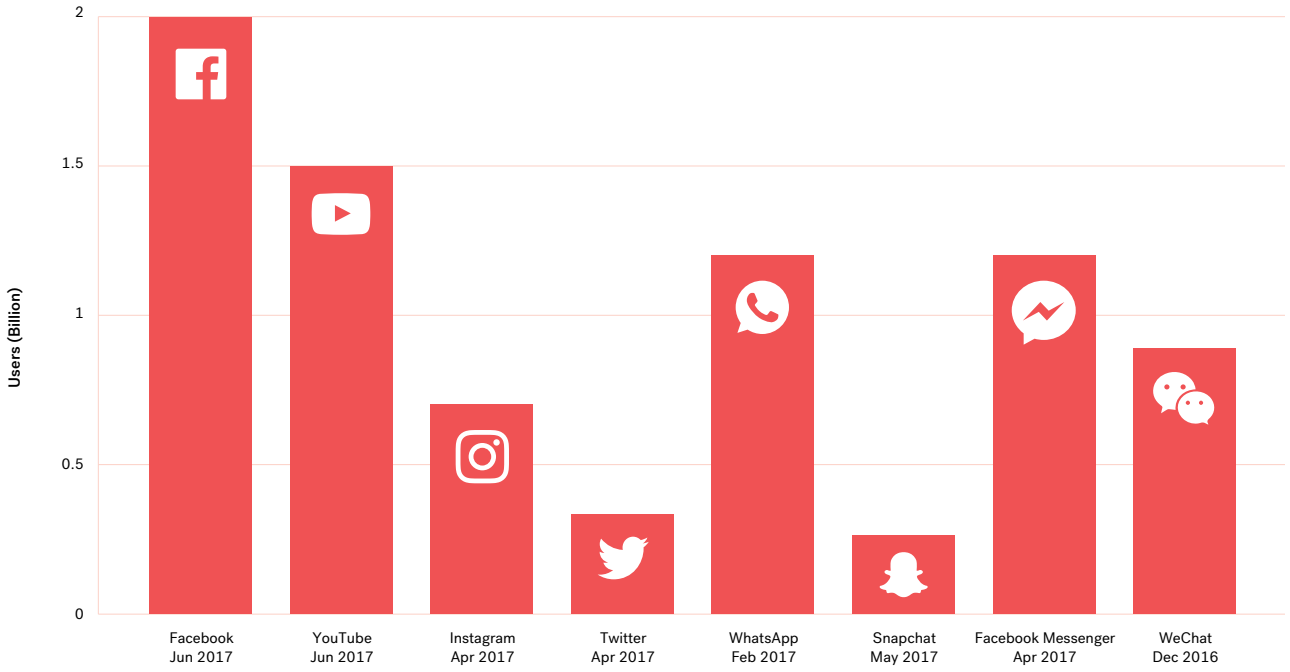
2 billion
Over two billion people are active on Facebook at least once a month

[1] Andrew Pettegree, "Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe--and Started the Protestant Reformation" (New York: Penguin Press, 2015).
[2] Randy Peterson, *Printer and the Preacher: Ben Franklin, George Whitefield, and the Surprising Friendship that Invented America* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015).
[3] Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (https://billygraham.org/)
[4] http://thesocialskinny.com/100-social-media-statistics-for-2012/

FACEBOOK MONTHLY ACTIVE USERS



MONTHLY ACTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USERS



How Luther and Whitefield Went Viral

It is hard to imagine a disillusioned German monk as the first viral celebrity five centuries before the advent of the internet, but the title is likely well-earned. Before anyone else, Martin Luther seized upon the potential of the printing press—the massive media innovation of his day—to spread news of the Gospel throughout Germany and Europe. Within the first decade of the Reformation, some six to seven million pamphlets were printed, more than a quarter of them Luther's.

This is all the more remarkable given that Luther was a little-known monk in an inconspicuous part of Germany. Yet thanks to his connections with printers, writes Luther's friend Friedrich Myconius, "hardly 14 days had passed when these propositions [95 Theses] were known throughout Germany and within four weeks almost all of Christendom was familiar with them."[5]

Luther saw the potential not only of the printing press, but also of social networks to spread his message. Unlike many of his Catholic counterparts, Luther wrote in German instead of Latin and published visually illustrated pamphlets instead of books. Like YouTube videos, Instagram photos, or blog posts, Luther's pamphlets were intended to be shared. They were short, illustrative, and designed to be printed quickly and passed from hand to hand. At many points during the Reformation, Luther published a new pamphlet every day. The result: they spread like wildfire through hundreds of small printing shops across Europe, shaping the collective thought of millions.

Luther leveraged and adapted the media technologies of his day to propel the Gospel message, and it went viral. Historian Andrew Pettegree sums up the interrelation of Luther and the printing press this way: "Printing was essential to the creation of Martin Luther, but Luther was also a determining, shaping force in the German printing industry."[6]

Two hundred years later at the beginning of the 18th century, we see a very similar virality propel the First Great Awakening. The early American colonies were going through their own media revolution driven by the advent of newspapers. Newspapers were inexpensive, quickly printed, written by local communities, and commanded impressive circulation in America's growing cities. They promised to connect with the reading public daily. Innovator Benjamin Franklin quickly saw this potential and pioneered new partnerships with newspapers so that popular articles could be printed across all the colonies overnight.

George Whitefield, the famous preacher of the Great Awakening, forged a close partnership with Franklin. Whitefield leveraged Franklin's new media empire as well as pushing its boundaries. Thanks to Franklin's publicity, Whitefield preached to audiences of over 20,000—the largest recorded gatherings in early American history. Franklin's press covered the news of Whitefield's events as he travelled from town to town. Perhaps most importantly, newspapers reprinted hundreds of the best revival sermons, which were then read and delivered to congregations across the colonies. Newspapers united the colonies under the same revival preaching, fueling America's First Great Awakening.

According to Randy Peterson, "Whitefield and Franklin were the most famous men in 18th century-America: the printer and the preacher."[7]

Both Luther and Whitefield saw the importance of seizing media innovations for spreading the Gospel. Each forged partnerships with media players, created unique and compelling content designed to be shared, and were unabashed in promoting that content for God's glory.

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[5] http://www.economist.com/node/21541719
[6] Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther.*
[7] Randy Peterson, *The Printer and the Preacher.*

A thought experiment might help. Imagine a single coffee shop with a billion people visiting every day, lingering to talk to their friends about life. In that same coffee shop, 80 percent of American teens dropped by, and at least a million Americans a month joined the conversations there, asking questions like "Is God real?" and "Who is Jesus?". Wouldn't the church want to be in that coffee shop? Joining the dialogue? Offering quality answers to those all-important questions? The coffee shop, of course, is digital media—a modern day Aeropagus of massive scale.

The reality is that hundreds of thousands of Americans ask questions about faith every day online. Search terms (questions people ask in Google) related to the word "Jesus" revealed 3.8 million queries in a single month alone in the United States.[5] Furthermore, studies show that youth disproportionately look to Google for answers before consulting any other source[6]—whether the questions are about new products or spirituality.

At the time of this writing, a simple test proves the point. The question "Is God real?" produced the following top search results in Google (in order): a two-minute video by apologist and youth-earth creationist Ken Ham targeted at Christians, an article about DNA science, a slide show leading with water as proof for God's existence, and, overwhelmingly the most comprehensive and well-designed, an introduction to God by the Mormon Church with the ability to live chat with someone about faith.

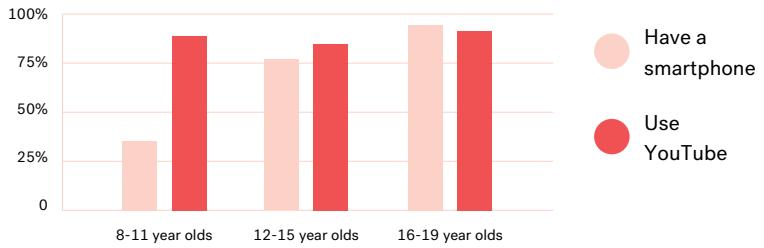
While we are not specifically critiquing any particular site, it is our general observation that the American church can do better. The absence of consistent, prominent sites with clear pathways to engage inquirers is especially concerning given the preponderance of time people now spend online.

If we could tell the early church that nearly 30 percent of the world's population would use the same communication channel once a month or more, how might they have seized the opportunity?

[8] Google Monthly Search Volume; BrightEdge Data Cube, March 2017
[9] https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/interactive-report/gen-z-a-look-inside-its-mobile-first-mindset/

Social media trends for Gen Z strongly indicate a future of ubiquitous digital media presence. The average Gen Z spends nine hours a day on digital media.

SMARTPHONE AND YOUTUBE USAGE



By the time youth enter the prime age stage for religious switching—16-24 years old— nearly 100 percent have a smart phone and are consuming videos via YouTube and other social media sharing sites more than once a month. The subtext is that religious exploration will inevitably take place in this new social context: short videos will largely replace reading, texts and Facebook messages will replace casual face-to-face conversations. In fact, only 53 percent of Gen Z prefer face-to-face communication over social media tools.

In the new world of social media, innovative leaders command massive audiences. Currently, the world's most followed individual on social media is the racially charged, controversial 28-year-old Swedish video gamer PewDiePie (Felix Kjellberg), with 55 million YouTube subscriptions and a total of 15 billion views. To put this in context, Felix's videos have already been watched 75 times more than the total number of people who heard Billy Graham preach live over the course of his lifelong ministry.

An American social media icon, 36-year-old Casey Neistat, who like Felix also dropped out of college to pursue his social media platform, has received nearly two billion views and has 7.6 million YouTube subscriptions. If his subscribers were a religious denomination, they would constitute the second largest in America, trailing only Southern Baptists (16.1 million).

However, according to one poll, only 2 percent of all people on Twitter follow a religious leader, house of worship, or pastor.[9]

9 hours

The average Gen Z spends nine hours a day on social media.

94%

YouTube is the most pervasive entertainment platform for Gen Z, peaking at 94% monthly penetration among 16 to 19-year-olds.[8]

Only 2%

of all people on Twitter follow a religious leader, house of worship, or pastor.

[8] https://www.bpi.co.uk/assets/files/MIDiA%20Research%20Gen%20Z%20Report.pdf?inf_contact_key=211399555957201887ceb3c6258fd5f10c332ba776aaa1a24afc5b7c30b09ad8

[9] http://www.greymatterresearch.com/index_files/Online_Religion.htm

Where is the digital Martin Luther, George Whitefield, or Billy Graham—people who are not only leveraging digital media but pushing its boundaries for the sake of the unaffiliated?

This is not say that Christians have not engaged digitally; sermon podcasts do very well within their segment. Furthermore, a number of Christian leaders in the U.S. have found large markets for their digital content overseas and are thus influencing the shape of Christianity globally. In Africa, for instance, you are likely to encounter variations on the prosperity gospel as the dominant Christian expression, largely because of the success of American prosperity gospel preachers and their exported digital content. Similarly, substantial portions of Asia tend towards Reformed Protestantism because of the influence of the digital media produced by American Reformed preachers.

On Facebook and Twitter, too, Christian leaders have found measured success. Popular Bible teachers like Joyce Meyers have over four million followers, and T.D. Jakes and Rick Warren each have over two million. That is a significant following, but only a fraction of the followings of Twitter celebrities like Justin Bieber (99 million) or Ellen DeGeneres (72 million). While not boasting the highest followings, religious Facebook pages, however, consistently have claimed the top spots for Facebook engagement. For several years, the Jesus Daily received double the engagement (shares, likes, reposts) of any other page on Facebook.

However, provided the scale of the opportunity, the numbers above suggest that the primary audience is not the unaffiliated but the converted. There is a conspicuous lack of Christian innovators and communicators among prominent social media innovators and leaders, and none that we could find with a substantial presence focused on those outside the faith about the faith.

Which raises the question: *Where is the digital Martin Luther, George Whitefield, or Billy Graham—people who are not only leveraging digital media, but pushing its boundaries for the sake of the unaffiliated?*

Recommendations

What should the church do?

It is our view that the new world of digital media holds historically unprecedented opportunities for the spread of the Gospel message. Of course there are challenges. Digital media can tend towards truncated communication and information overload. Social media can enable facades, fake identities, echo chambers, and shallow relationships. Anonymity can empower the basest of human opinions. We don't find any of this surprising. We've uploaded our sin along with our ideals, and in some new ways the Gospel message shines the brighter. Digital media is an inescapable part of our world and a growing influence among our youth. It is connecting an increasing percentage of the world's population. There are tremendous possibilities here for the good news of Christ to reach people who have never heard it, or who have stereotyped Christianity into impotence and dismissed it. New formats and mediums offer content rich possibilities for communicating the beauty of the Gospel.

Inspired by the examples of Luther, Whitefield, and Graham, we think it's time to foster the kind of innovation that caused the Gospel to advance through the media channels of those earlier eras. We think the following interventions could help:

I. Create a strong, outward-facing brand targeted at the unaffiliated

II. Invest in a studio that produces high-quality multimedia content to reach the unaffiliated through social networks

III. Provide social media resources for thoughtful Christian pastors and public voices

IV. Improve the online presence of local churches in their neighborhoods

I. Create a strong, outward-facing brand targeted at the unaffiliated

There is an urgent need for a trustworthy digital brand that provides excellent answers to common questions the unchurched have about Christianity. In the online space, we think this is the lowest hanging fruit to begin reaching the unaffiliated. Millions of people query faith-related questions every month in America and struggle to find answers that are clear and compelling with an offer for personal contact or follow-up. In the years ahead, we expect this number to increase as digital natives turn first to digital media to explore their questions about God. Many of the faith-based brands are designed to speak to people already in faith; we think there is a need to reach those who are earlier in their faith journey.

Specifically, we could envision investing in a domain and building a best-in-class website with a range of high quality responses to common questions, presented in various sharable formats. It could offer online chats and mentors for those with questions, and it would invest in search and social so the website is the top hit for common questions. It would be mobile first and create high quality videos from Christian leaders to articulate faith to the lost. It could even be translated globally into dozens of languages. We think this is an ideal place for philanthropic investment, since most high quality Christian websites face Christian markets and the few outward facing websites tend to be underdeveloped.

II. Invest in a studio that produces high-quality multimedia content to reach the unaffiliated through social networks

Statistically, every unaffiliated American with at least a modest social presence is almost certain to have within their network, even if weakly, a connection to an ambassador for Christ. Furthermore, given the amount of time that youth spend consuming social media content, and short videos in particular, we think there is an opportunity to create world- class, sharable content that provides Christians with opportunities to initiate spiritual conversations among their networks and invite others to consider the Gospel.

Specifically, we could image a studio that cultivates young storytelling talent to communicate Christian ideas and themes via social media platforms. The videos, animations, photo quotes, short stories, and more would be highly sharable and designed to engage the unaffiliated. They can create their own brands on social media; this has been done in the past with podcast networks. The content could be used in many places. For example, church plants could leverage the studio to begin their media presence in a new community, or by individuals seeking to communicate the Gospel in a culturally astute way. The studio would also create a community of content and media innovators that would begin building up this ecosystem. Special attention would be given to recruiting and developing young talent in much the same way that record labels scout and sign young talent.

Right now, churches do not think "digital first"—and often neglect the digital aspect altogether.

III. Provide social media resources for thoughtful Christian pastors and public voices

Many of the most thoughtful Christian voices in America have an underdeveloped social media presence. If it is true that only 2 percent of people on Twitter follow a pastor or religious leader, that number is too small. Many pastors find the digital media world a perplexing distraction from their main work. We think there is a need to provide easy resources for these pastors to elevate their voice among networks outside the church.

Specifically, we think that a targeted set of trainings could go a long way. These trainings would focus especially on escaping social media echo chambers to engage the unaffiliated. Possibly these trainings could look like a fellows program. They would involve more than "how-tos," such as providing practical support services. The goal of this incubator would be to provide training and resources that elevate the voices of the best Christian communicators without distracting from their core ministry.

IV. Improve the online presence of local churches in their neighborhoods

Studies show that the majority of potential guests visit a church's website before walking in the door. This represents a significant evangelism opportunity. Right now, churches do not think "digital first"—in fact, they often neglect the digital aspect altogether. We can imagine creating a firm that works with church plants to help new churches think digital first from the outset, creating excellent websites that are integrated with social media platforms to attract the unaffiliated.

It is certain that we are in the midst of a transformative moment in communications; our hope is that we would recapture the innovation that marked earlier generations in similar moments.

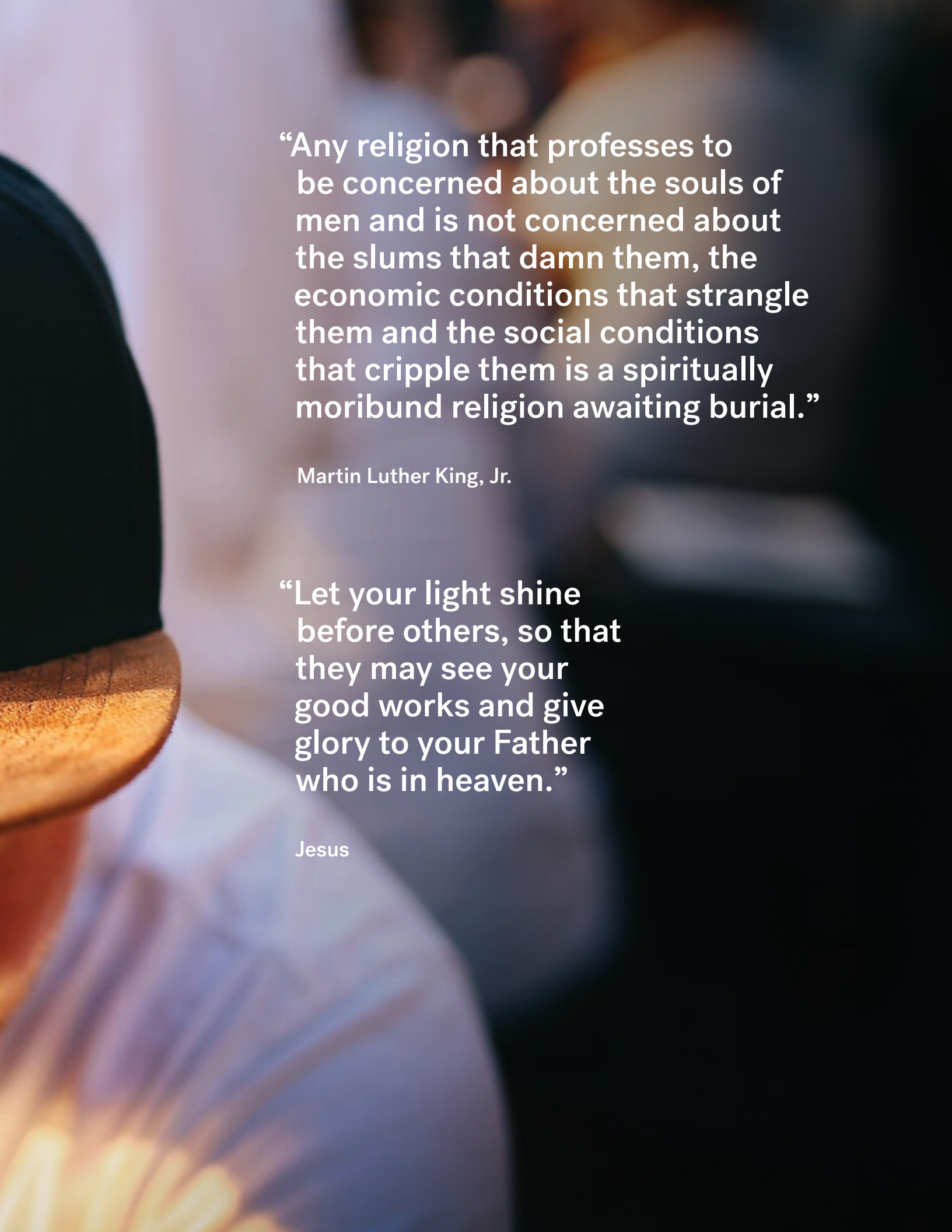
Chapter Five

Care for the Poor

Care for the poor and oppressed is an essential and inescapable element of the Gospel message. It is pervasive and consistent in the Old and New Testaments. It was the witness of the early church and indeed the church throughout the last 2,000 years. Can it be any surprise, then, that historically the church has flourished during seasons of sacrificial service to the least of these?

We believe it is part of God's design for the church to care for the poor because it is God's heart to serve those who cannot repay, even as He did for us. When the church operates with love that requires nothing in return, it brings about the very witness of Christ at the cross. In God's economy, truly self-denying love is an attractive love. As Jesus said, "Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) By our good works, especially our care for those in need, the world sees a picture of the love of God offered freely.

LOVE YOUR
NEIGHBOR



“Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus

Impious Generosity: First Century Church and Social Crises

One of the more revolutionary elements of the early church was their devotion to the belief that all people were deserving of God's love and therefore our compassion. There was no shortage of humanitarian and social crises in the early Roman Empire, and from its onset the early church made it a central part of their witness to care for those in need.

In the second century, one of the more devastating plagues in human history swept through the Roman Empire. It is estimated that a third of the population of the Roman Empire was killed by what is now to be believed to be smallpox. Panic ruled the streets, as bodies were tossed in heaps and carts of the dead were hauled to be burned. Family members pushed their own living relatives out of windows for fear of contagion; even the father of modern anatomy, Galen, fled in terror to the country.

In the midst of this panic, the church rose up in compassion. As the second wave of the plague ripped through the empire, the church, as the Bishop of Alexandria wrote, "showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains... winning high commendation so that in death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal to martyrdom."[1]

It was not only in times of plague; early Christians were so generous with the hungry that by the fourth century, the church had become a major force in the Roman Empire. Even the Roman Emperor Julian took note and launched an Imperial welfare program, giving wine and food to pagan priests to share with the poor, instructing them that: "the impious Galileans in addition to their own, support our [poor], and welcoming them into their *agapae*, they attract them as children are attracted with cakes. While the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity, and by a display of false compassion have established and given effect to their pernicious lies... this causes contempt for our gods."[2]

By the fourth century, care for the sick and poor in the church was such an important component of the church's ministry that one of the Council of Nicaea's directives was that every cathedral should have a hospice, where the sick and leprous could be cared for. This was the origin of the western hospital.

The church grew substantially in this moment—it is estimated that there were 40,000 people in the entire Roman Empire who were Christian at the time of the first plague, less than one tenth of one percent. Less than two centuries later, there were 32 million Christians across the entire Roman Empire. While growth was not singularly due to the care for the sick and poor, unquestionably it was a significant factor for at least two very practical reasons: mortality rates for Christians were lower due to better care during illness, and it attracted non-believers who needed the same care. The church, by fulfilling the work of Christ to care for the least of these, transformed an Empire.

[1] See, Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).
[2] Ibid.

$1.2 trillion

Religious organizations' annual benefit to society

The church should be famous for its radical care for the poor, and in so doing, point people to Jesus.

We believe that the American church today is already doing much to care for the poor. The church's impact on poverty is significant and essential in society. However, this care is not understood well outside our four walls. Often it is perceived negatively. We need to do a better job of telling that story. In addition, there is much more that the church could do to recapture the radical generosity of early periods in church history to truly model Christ's sacrifice.

In brief, we believe the church should do the following:

- Increase church-driven care for the poor via better approaches to resource mobilization
- Increase the effectiveness of church-driven care for the poor via investments in social entrepreneurship, cross-church collaboration, and more effective tools
- Help the broader society see the good works already being done via awareness building

How is the American church today doing in its care for the poor?

The church in America contributes substantially to caring for the least amongst us, much more than you might guess from scanning the news. According to a recent article published in the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, "religious organizations spend $9.2 billion on social programs annually to deliver a staggering $1.2 trillion in benefit to the U.S. economy."[3]

The church's leadership in caring for the homeless exemplifies this. A recent Baylor University study of church-based care for homeless populations within 11 U.S. cities found that almost 60 percent of emergency shelter beds were provided by faith-based organizations, including churches, synagogues, and mosques. Citing this research, Christianity Today recently wrote: "In the 11 locations studied (Atlanta, Baltimore, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Jacksonville,

[3] Grim and Grim, "The Socio-economic Contribution of Religion to American Society: An Empirical Analysis" (Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion, Vol 12, 2016). http://www.religjournal.com/pdf/ijrr12003.pdf. Note: while this research encompasses all religious organizations in the U.S., the Christian church (Evangelical, mainline, African American, Catholic, etc.) comprises the large majority of that spend.

Omaha, Phoenix, Portland, San Diego, and Seattle), faith-based nonprofits were particularly effective at reducing the homeless population, and saved taxpayers an estimated $119 million with their care and training."[4]

Another research report, also from Baylor, looked at the impact that faith and faith-motivated individuals and organizations have on reducing crime and delinquency, finding that faith-driven work: "play[s] a significant role in reducing crime and delinquency, helping addicts to stay sober, reforming prisoners and helping ex-prisoners remain crime free."[5]

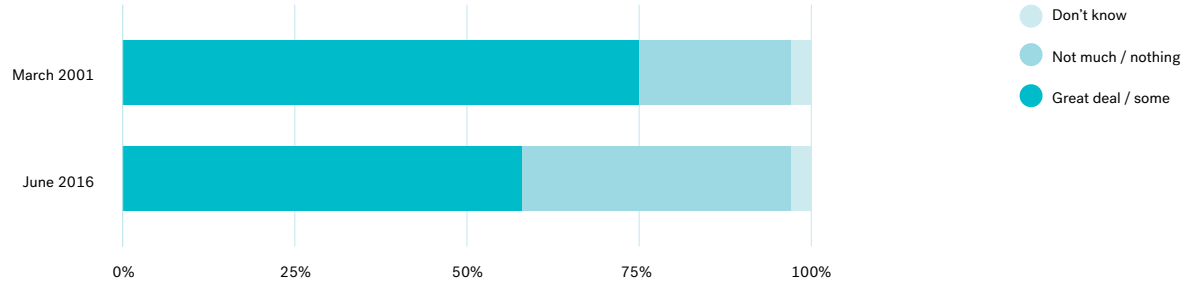
In short, the American church plays an essential role in caring for the least amongst us.

However, the common public perception tells a very different story. Public perception of the church's contribution to the poor and society has worsened significantly over the last few years. According to recent research from Pew, almost 40 percent of Americans believe that religious institutions "make little to no contribution [to solving social problems], a 16-point increase since 2008."[6] At the opposite end of the spectrum, only 65 percent of adults indicate that religious institutions contribute "a great deal" or "some" to solving important social problems. This is a sharp decline from 75 percent less than ten years ago.[7] Perhaps most striking is the unaffiliated perspective. Today, 62 percent of the unaffiliated do not believe that houses of worship contribute to solving important social challenges. That is an increase of almost 30 percent since 2008.

62%
of the unaffiliated do not believe that houses of worship contribute to solving important social challenges.

[4] http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/march/christian-approach-fighting-homelessness-pays-off-baylor.html
[5] http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/319014-new-study-reveals-faith-based-organizations-shoulder-heavy
[6] https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/do-churches-contribute-to-solving-social-problems
[7] http://www.pewforum.org/2016/07/13/2-religion-in-public-life/#fewer-now-say-houses-of-worship-key-in-solving-social-problems

% OF U.S. ADULTS WHO SAY CHURCHES, SYNAGOGUES, AND OTHER HOUSES OF WORSHIP CONTRIBUTE TO SOLVING IMPORTANT SOCIAL PROBLEMS

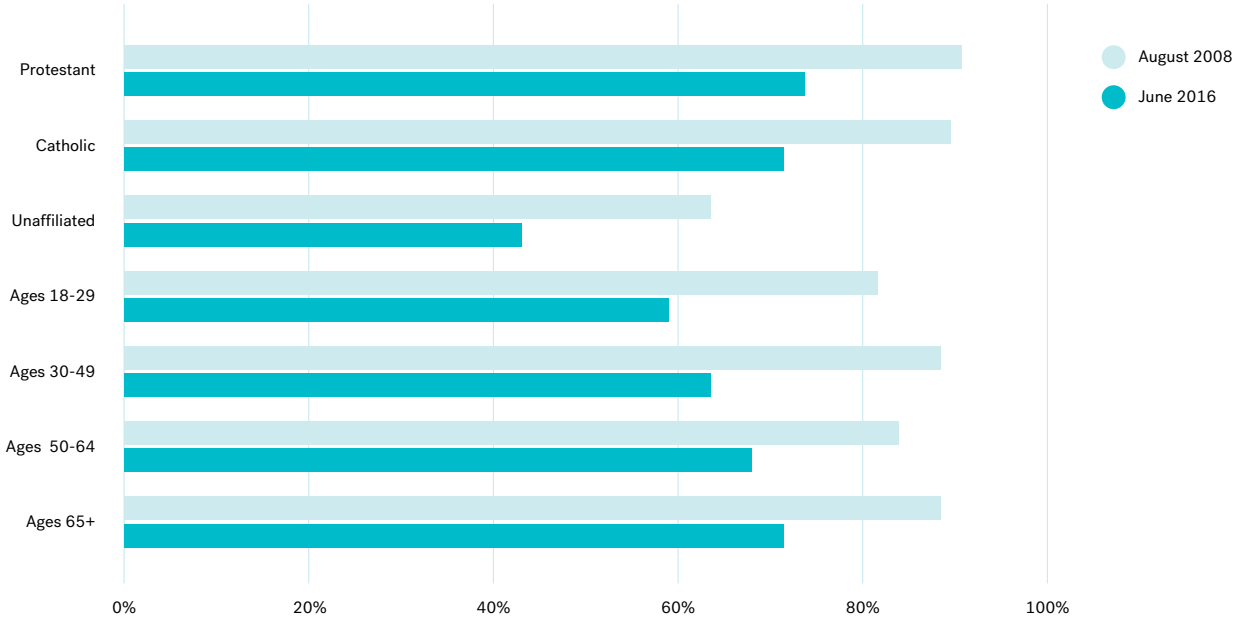


Instead, many unaffiliated perceive the church to be a social club: “Even the most welcoming and well-attended churches are more club-like than not: Their benefits are enjoyed mainly by a small group and not the public at large.”[8] Given that negative perception, is it any wonder that more and more young people are leaving the church?

Why has the public’s perception of the church’s contribution to society worsened so significantly in recent years? There are many hypotheses for why, and no singularly conclusive survey data. Some studies indicate that Millennials care about social justice causes such as racial inequality more than previous generations[9] —an area where the church has had a mixed reputation in the last 100 years. Likewise, many of the most visible efforts across churches have a particular political or policy component to them, and when coupled with the well-documented increasing polarization in American politics, it has not lent itself to a discourse of gentle humility or turning the other cheek. It is our contention that reinvigorating both our effort and witness in areas of sacrificial love and care for the poor and marginalized in our society can recapture the narrative we described earlier about the second and third century church.

[8] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/17/churches-are-more-club-than-public-good-why-do-they-need-tax-exemptions/
[9] https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED528768

% OF U.S. ADULTS WHO SAY CHURCHES, SYNAGOGUES, AND OTHER HOUSES OF WORSHIP CONTRIBUTE “A GREAT DEAL” OR “SOME” TO SOLVING IMPORTANT SOCIAL PROBLEMS



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.
Source: Survey conducted June 15-26, 2016, among U.S. adults. "Evangelicals Rally to Trump, Religious 'Nones' Back Clinton" Pew Research Center

The American church is doing much more to solve large social challenges than opinion polls suggest. It is also true that significant needs remain. Highlighted below are a few representative examples.

A historic heroin and opioid epidemic is ravaging large portions of America. Heroin use increased fivefold in the last decade alone. Drug overdoses are now the leading cause of death among Americans under 50. There were 59,000 overdose deaths in 2016 alone.[10] For comparison, at its peak the HIV epidemic caused approximately 45,000 deaths in 1995.[11] In 1993, gun deaths peaked at an estimated 40,000.[12]

14.5 million American children live in poverty. 13.1 million children do not have reliable access to food. The vast majority of these children are living in Appalachian or Southern states (which have a higher rate of church attendance) and rely on some sort of governmental assistance through their parents or caregivers.[13]

The challenge of mass incarceration compounds this. Currently, seven out of every 1,000 Americans are in prison. That is more than 300 percent greater than the incarceration rate of the 1970s.[14] It is

[10] https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/6/6/15743986/opioid-epidemic-overdose-deaths-2016
[11] http://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/2009/12/mnar1-0912.html
[12] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/mar/24/usgunviolence.usa
[13] http://www.feedingamerica.org/assets/pdfs/fact-sheets/poverty-and-hunger-fact-sheet.pdf
[14] http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/23/world/americas/23iht-23prison.12253738.html?mcubz=1

How can the church care more for the least among us with a radical love and grace that honors Christ and draws others to Him?

also more than five times the rate of incarceration in most other rich democracies today.

Globally, the challenges are just as staggering. There are over 20 million victims of human trafficking globally.[15] The most common reason for human trafficking is sexual exploitation. The U.S. is not immune from this. Annually there are over 4,000 sex trafficking cases reported within the U.S., a figure that more than likely under-represents the extent of the challenge.[16] Recently, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children estimated that one in six endangered runaways are likely sex trafficking victims.[17]

Likewise, today there are over 65 million displaced people globally, more than at any point in human history.[18] Refugee status has become a permanent state for millions. The Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, established in 1991 to house Somalis fleeing from conflict, continues to grow. With over 460,000 refugees, Dadaab could be considered the fourth-largest city in Kenya.[19]

There are complex political and social policy questions embedded in many of these areas, and we operate with humility on matters of prudential judgement. Nonetheless, the approach we take is less a particular policy stance and instead asks the question, how can the church care more for the least among us with a radical love and grace that honors Christ and draws others to Him?

We believe these examples, and many, many others, represent a significant opportunity and need to increase the church's care for the poor. The church could, and should, be doing more. For example, between $70 billion and $80 billion is given annually to Christian causes in the U.S.[20] While a significant amount in total, it falls far short of what it could, and should, be. For example, average weekly church attenders give only 2-3 percent of their income to charitable causes, which includes their church. These are not the occasional attenders. These are Christians participating every week in the life of the church, giving 2-3 percent of their income on average. While meaningfully more than the unaffiliated on average, it could hardly be described by most as sacrificial. Perhaps most telling, Christian giving is growing at a slower pace relative to all charitable contributions. Imagine the good the church could do if we doubled giving to 4-5 percent, or even quadrupled.

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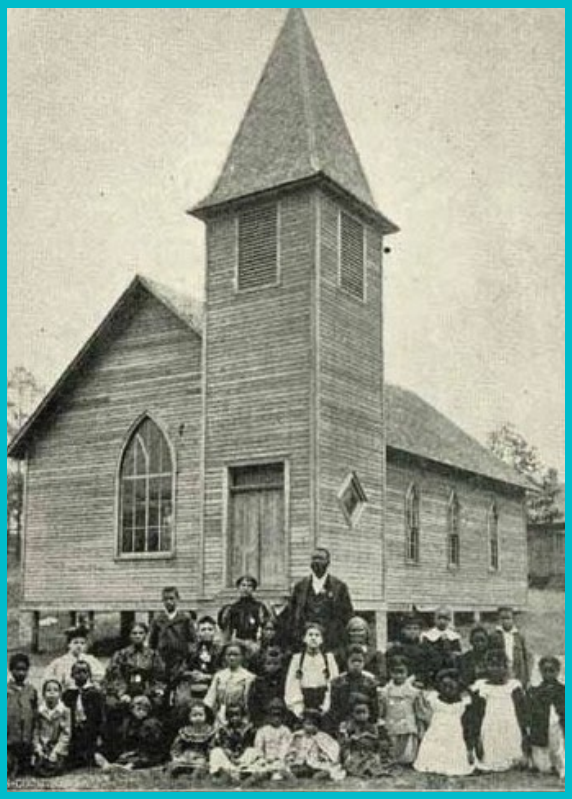
[15] https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/how-sex-trafficking-goes-unnoticed-in-
[16] america/470166/
[17] https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/how-sex-trafficking-goes-unnoticed-in-
[18] america/470166/
[19] https://polarisproject.org/sex-trafficking
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015
[20] https://qz.com/560768/when-refugees-camps-last-three-generations-we-must-accept-theyre-not-going-anywhere/
This includes local church tithes and offerings



Community Mission: Black Churches After the Civil War

In the aftermath of the Civil War, recently emancipated slaves presented a massive challenge for the black church. The Freedman's Bureau, originally established by Lincoln to provide economic and social assistance to freed African Americans, quickly waned in effectiveness in the face of Southern resistance during Reconstruction. By 1872, it was disbanded; the hard task of building the economic and social fabric of African American communities in the South was taken up by African American churches and denominations.

Churches quickly became the center of their communities. With the rapid growth (see the sidebar "Exponential Church Planting") of denominations like the AME and AME Zion, there were thousands of black churches across the South by the 1870s. Churches served as the "cultural womb of the black community." A hallmark of the black church has been its deep concern for social uplift of the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed. Members provided care for the sick and financial assistance to college bound students and others on hard times. In addition to its priestly functions, the black church functioned as 1) an arena for the formation, maintenance, and expression of African American culture, 2) a social support network for participants (including the formation of service entities like mutual aid societies), and 3) a context for the acquisition and practice of leadership and organizing skills.[21] Historian Albert Raboteau notes,

> *"As the single institution that black communities controlled, churches played an active role in addressing these issues, as did their ministers through sermons, speeches, and deeds. Black churches helped form self-help organizations, such as benevolent societies, that were designed to aid widows, to pay for burial of the poor, and to teach*

> *children to read and write. Moral reform societies also served to foster racial pride and community activism. Through these societies black people acted cooperatively to change the conditions in which they lived."*[22]

These churches served often as the only structure in the entire community that could (or would allow blacks to) hold large meetings, so they became incredibly influential during this time in organizing and mobilization. In the 19th century, black churches often doubled as meeting centers and schools. They provided shelter for visitors as well as temporary theaters and concert halls. In the absence of separate meeting facilities for such functions, the church became the center of public life. During Reconstruction, black churches also served as political halls. They were organized both politically and spiritually and were relied upon to address the issues that affected their members. It was in part for this reason that the black church was the seedbed of the civil rights movement a century later. In observing the black church in Philadelphia during this time, W.E.B. Du Bois noted the following regarding the church's efforts for social betterment:

> *"Beneficial societies in endless number are formed here; secret societies keep in touch; co-operative and building associations have lately sprung up; the minister often acts as an employment agent; considerable charitable and relief work is done and special meetings held to aid special projects. The race problem in all its phases is continually being discussed, and, indeed, from this forum many a youth goes forth inspired to work."*[23]

Large relief societies were formed in the North through African American churches and denominations, transferring large amounts of aid in the form of wealth, pastors, and teachers to the South to assist impoverished black communities. Many prominent historically black colleges and universities began during this time through the black church, some with the assistance of white churches and denominations, including Morehouse College, Shaw University, Fisk University, Livingston College, Stillman College, Morris Brown, and many others.

It is striking that despite extraordinary poverty, social dislocation, and oppression, the black church was incredibly effective at serving the needs of their community spiritually and materially. It is an interesting question to ask why so many former slaves owned by men who attended church would follow Jesus when they gained their freedom; it is no doubt in part because the Gospel became real to these communities through the extraordinary charity and compassion demonstrated by black churches following the Civil War.

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[21] See, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience.*

[22] Albert Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33.

[23] See, W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899).

Recommendations

To meet these significant challenges of caring for the poor, we believe the church should do the following:

I. Increase church-driven care for the poor via better approaches to resource mobilization

II. Help the broader society see the good works already being done via awareness building and targeted PR

III. Increase the effectiveness of church-driven care for the poor via investments in social entrepreneurship, cross-church collaboration, and more effective tools

I. Increase church-driven care for the poor via better approaches to resource mobilization

There are many reasons the average weekly church participant only gives away 2-3 percent of his income. Ultimately this is a challenge of formation and catechesis by the pastoral leadership. But there are ways we can make giving easier and more normative.

One method would be to develop a crowdfunding platform tailored for churches. For example, GoFundMe is an online platform that is revolutionizing charitable giving. GoFundMe allows individuals and organizations to launch social fundraising campaigns, linking donors much more closely with individual causes and needs, increasing transparency, and making giving social. Since its launch in 2010, more than $4 billion has been given to charitable causes via crowdfunded GoFundMe campaigns.[24]

We believe a crowdfunding application for churches could help spur additional giving for specific opportunities (e.g., launching a new benevolence ministry or helping fund a short-term missions project).

A church-based crowdfunding application should be designed in partnership with Christian behavioral economists and psychologists to build in methods that help motivate giving. This must be done in a way that strengthens theological convictions and formation instead of manipulating self-centered idolatry. We believe that it is eminently possible, however. For example, time and time again empirical data demonstrates that people give more:

[24] https://techcrunch.com/2017/06/09/gofundme-europe-expansion/

- In response to an optimistic vision and hope for change, instead of an appeal to guilt and shame.[25]

- When there is a compelling vision instead of an appeal to "keep the lights on."[26]

- When there are social proofs—people know that their peers and people they respect are also giving.[27]

- When they can connect with the recipient on an individual or emotional level.

We believe these principles, and others like them, are aligned with the hope of the Gospel—a Biblical call to community and transparency, and love for people made in the image of God.

Building on these principles, and others like them, an integrated crowdfunding application and set of related tools for churches could include:

- An app-based giving platform churches can use to facilitate monthly tithes and offerings as well as design and launch special giving campaigns, all leveraging best giving practices as referenced above.

- Integrated small group curriculum, sermon notes, videos, and social media tools to complement the church app for ongoing giving and special campaigns.

- Additional integrated resources from places like The Chalmers Center (see section II below) to help churches communicate a rigorous vision for caring for the poor, along with theologically-grounded best practices.

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[25] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/14/business/media/marketing-charity-water-syria.html?_r=0

[26] *See Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money* by Christian Smith, Michael Emmerson, and Patricia Snell, Oxford University Press, 2008

[27] https://www.networkforgood.com/nonprofitblog/6-quick-behavioral-economics-lessons-for-fundraisers/

II. Increase the effectiveness of church-driven care for the poor via investments in social entrepreneurship, cross-church collaboration, and more effective tools

We need to recruit and launch Christian social entrepreneurs in every major city to help churches care for the poor. There are several regional and national incubators and training programs for Christian social entrepreneurs already modeling best practices in this area, on a national and city-wide basis.

Praxis Labs (praxislabs.org) has worked with over 50 social enterprise founders as "Non-Profit Fellows" to help them sharpen their strategy and approach, build their organizations, and connect them to philanthropists and other sources of capital. To date, social enterprises that have gone through the Praxis program have an average annual growth rate of 26 percent.

On a regional or city-wide basis, organizations like City Leadership in Memphis (cityleadership.org) and Access Ventures in Louisville (accessventures.org) are working with local churches, civic leaders, and other non-profits to mobilize, equip, and fund new social entrepreneurs dedicated to serving their cities.

Every major and mid-major U.S. city should have a something similar to recruit, train, and deploy Christian social entrepreneurs dedicated to equipping the church to serve the poor and the widows in their city. Likewise, we should continue to resource and grow national organizations to launch and scale social ventures effectively serving the poor.

We also need to invest in better regional and local collaboration across like-minded churches to care for the poor. In many cities, homeless ministries have already established this model. For example, the Union Gospel Mission in Seattle (ugm.org) partners with 185+ local churches to serve the poor of Seattle across a variety of programs.[28] Instead of each church trying to create their own unique homeless ministry, they have effectively joined together to resource and support one highly effective Christian homeless ministry. We believe many more examples like this should exist, of local churches partnering together to serve the poor and widows of their city instead of launching duplicative efforts for services such as foster care, job training, food banks, and more.

[28] 2015 *Union Gospel Mission Annual Report*

We also need to invest in better regional and local collaboration across like-minded churches to care for the poor.

We should also incorporate effective and theologically grounded resources for caring for the poor and widows into seminary and church planting training resources. For example, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert with The Chalmers Center have developed a great set of resources to provide theological rigor and effective approaches to help churches and individuals care for the poor. Their "When Helping Hurts" series, including "When Helping Hurts: The Small Group Experience" and "Helping Without Hurting: In Church Benevolence" serve as a rich set of resources to reframe benevolence within the church and to help churches, small groups, and individuals work through a coherent and intentional approach to developing a clear benevolence philosophy, principles, and practices.

III. Help the broader society see the good works already being done via awareness building and targeted PR

There is a significant disconnect between the many ways Christians and churches already care for the poor and public awareness of this work. That may reflect a Godly humility, of Christians working quietly to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. However, we believe this significant gap in public perception is a missed opportunity to help the unaffiliated and others understand the impact of the Gospel. We are communicating the Gospel in a language that younger generations will hear and accept. We are called to let our light shine before men that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

To address this, the church should invest in targeted national and regional public relations campaigns, featuring stories of churches and church members sacrificially caring for the poor and widows in their midst. From the compelling research coming out of Baylor University, and many other sources, we know that there are thousands if not millions of these stories to tell. For the sake of God's fame and a witness to the lost, we must tell them.

Chapter Six

Building Long-term Witness

What causes some people to receive the Gospel with joy and others to reject it? On an individual level, only God knows. But for centuries, missionaries have understood that every culture has distinct barriers to belief: certain values, narratives of meaning, or assumed truths that create a plausibility hurdle for belief in Christ. For first-century Jews, the *universality* of the offer of redemption presented one such barrier. For first-century Greeks, the *particularity* of bodily resurrection presented another. Each culture has its own dissonances and resonances, and in every culture barriers require careful engagement in order for the Gospel message to be heard as the good news that it is.

“Oh, Adam’s sons, how cleverly you defend yourselves against all that might do you good!”

C.S. Lewis

“Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them… [In response to poor stewardship] You ought to have invested!”

Jesus

We believe that if we are to see millions of youth come back to Christ, and millions more accept him for the first time, we need both a strong ground game of local church ministry reaching one person at a time and a strategic long-term effort to articulate the Gospel in our culture. To do both well, we believe we need to reinvest, like we once did, in leadership development pipelines that equip emerging leaders to articulate the Gospel persuasively and with distinction in the world. We also think we need to invest in and help convene Christian academic and thought leaders who inhabit the front lines of thought and discovery and are wrestling with the ideas of our time. It is as Mark Noll wrote over two decades ago: "The scandal of the Evangelical mind is that there is not much of one."

This is not about conflicts in our culture, or political issues, at least not directly. We believe that the church proposes, not imposes. This is about articulating to the world a vision of what life in our time would be like with Jesus in a way that would attract the lost: A life of hope amidst uncertainty; flourishing amidst brokenness; encouragement amidst need.

But ideas only shape culture when they get legs. We want to bridge the perceived gap between the life of the mind and the life of the church in order to resuscitate a thoughtful, public witness that both responds to and drives how we should engage with the world around us. Why do we want to do all this? An illustration can help. Jesus helps us understand the task of evangelism by using the parable of a farmer

sowing seed. The seed, which is the good news, falls on different soil types and yields different results. Upon some soil types the seed never takes root, or is choked out before it reaches maturity. In good soil, however, the seed takes root, grows, and bears much fruit. The central point of the parable is that we are to sow the seed generously, regardless of soil type. However, as any good first-century farmer would know, the way to produce a greater crop is to till the soil, removing the rocks and making straight furrows, preparing the way for the harvest before it is even planted.

Missiologists often understand this preparation as the work of removing barriers to belief and making lines of connection between cultural values and the Gospel message. It requires time, thoughtfulness, and deep engagement with culture. The fruit of this work—building a plausibility structure for faith—is often not seen for a generation or more.

It may be slow, but it is vitally important work. The 20th-century evangelical leader and former Princeton professor J. Gresham Machen famously tied the effectiveness of preaching to this preparatory work. He wrote: "We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion."[1] In other words, tilling the soil—creating plausibility structures into which the Gospel seed can take root and grow—is *vitally important* for the Gospel to reach a culture.

The Importance of Dense Networks

How do we go about creating this cultural plausibility? History and sociology both point to the influence of what sociologists call "dense networks" of cultural leaders who are closely collaborating towards a common mission. In the early church, these were the networks of educated leaders who put pen to paper, writing in Latin and drawing upon Greek thought, to rebut common objections to faith facing local bodies of believers. In the Reformation, these were the networks of university professors who drew upon the Renaissance revival of classic languages to rearticulate the simple and clear Gospel message found in the New Testament.

In both the early church and the Reformation periods, plausibility structures were changed not by isolated "Great Men," but by networks

[1] J Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," *Princeton Theological Review*, Vol. 11, 1913.

of cultural leaders working with common purpose. They influenced other leaders and broader society alike. Hunter writes that, "The key actor in history is not individual genius but rather the network, and the new institutions that are created out of those networks."[2]

We think that is an important observation for an American church that has historically been strong at grass-roots evangelism and personal change; we firmly believe that it is vitally important is to continue the ground level mission work of the church, caring for and witnessing to one person at a time. But for reasons explored better by others than by us, the American church has not invested in leadership development to the same extent as it used to historically. This is what we believe needs to change. Put another way, we think it is both dense networks of leaders who have thought deeply about the questions of our day and the ground game of church-based missions that bring the Gospel to a society.

We firmly believe we need both ground level missional work and long-term investment in leadership.

Perhaps the most often-cited modern example of a dense network of Christians who influenced the world around them is the Clapham Sect of 19th-century England. An eclectic mix of cultural leaders spanning the sectors of finance, publishing, politics, church, and academics, the Clapham Sect founded an array of societies and organizations over the course of decades that would change the minds and hearts of the British Empire towards the evils of slavery. What's important to note here is that you don't have Wilberforce and Clapham without the Methodist movement in Britain 50 years prior (Wilberforce's relatives were close with George Whitefield; you can draw a straight line from Wesley to Newton to Wilberforce). Again, both cultural leaders and missional churches go hand in hand.

The labor of soil tilling is long, but historically, periods of church flourishing have often been preceded by such seasons—times when little fruit is seen, and like for a farmer, faithfulness is sustained by the long view.

When we look at the American church today, do we think with the long view? Are we investing in networks of thought leaders who will labor alongside local churches to create plausibility for the unaffiliated? What is the state of such networks today?

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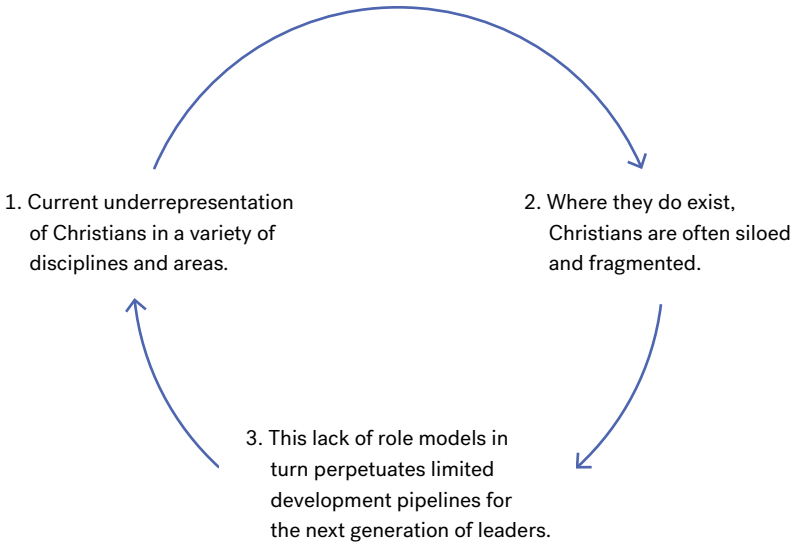
[2] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*, page 38.

Where Are the Dense Networks Today?

Baylor professor Alan Jacobs provides one answer. In his widely circulated 2016 Harper's essay, "What Became of the Christian Intellectuals?" Jacobs paints a less than optimistic picture. Compared even to recent moments in American history, there is a conspicuous lack of thoughtful Christian voices engaging today's society. When we take a deeper look, unsurprisingly, we find a lack of networks that serve to align such leaders around this task.

This flat-footedness comes at a particularly pressing time of cultural change and intellectual challenge. In the near and immediate future we will be facing questions that challenge our core assumptions about humanity and the role of God in life. Transhumanism, shifting labor markets due to automation, robotics, gene editing, and more will require Christian voices providing deeply thoughtful perspectives on complex and novel topics. We need to build the bench now.

Why such a lack of networks? In our interviews and research we've identified at least three primary factors contributing to the lack of dense networks. We've focused our work specifically within higher education, as we think this is where the major gap in the leadership development pipeline exists. We think there is a cycle preventing the ongoing formation of Christian thought leaders in our society.



Let's take these areas in turn.

Professors Matter: German Universities and the Reformation

The reasons for the Reformation are complex; theology, politics, and culture created a unique moment in history that changed the shape of Christianity. The Holy Roman Empire, dominating central Europe, was a confederation of various political governments, with cities, regions, and states enjoying various degrees of independence. When the Reformation swept through the Empire in the early 16th century, each political power had to choose to which side it would align.

In 2012, a very important research paper by Kim and Pfaff[3] looked at 461 major cities in the Holy Roman Empire to determine why they became either Catholic or Protestant. They examined multiple variables, including the presence of the printing press, political alliances, industry, and even geography for each city.

By far the most determinative factor? If a large portion of young people who were religious leaders in that city attended a university that was either strongly Protestant (Wittenberg or Basel) or Catholic (Cologne or Louvain). The preachers and pastors in the city were the ones who spread ideas and educated the general population; they received their formation at the universities.

Factors like the presence of the printing press or princely support were not determinative (as it turns out, printing presses were *negatively* correlated—the authors suspect that the printers didn't care who or what they printed, as long as it made money). In fact, if the prince was opposed to the Reformation, but the students went to a Protestant university, the town had a higher chance of becoming Protestant! As Kim and Pfaff put it, the Reformation at one level was a "movement spearheaded by a cohort of former university students who bridged the gap between the lecture hall and city hall."

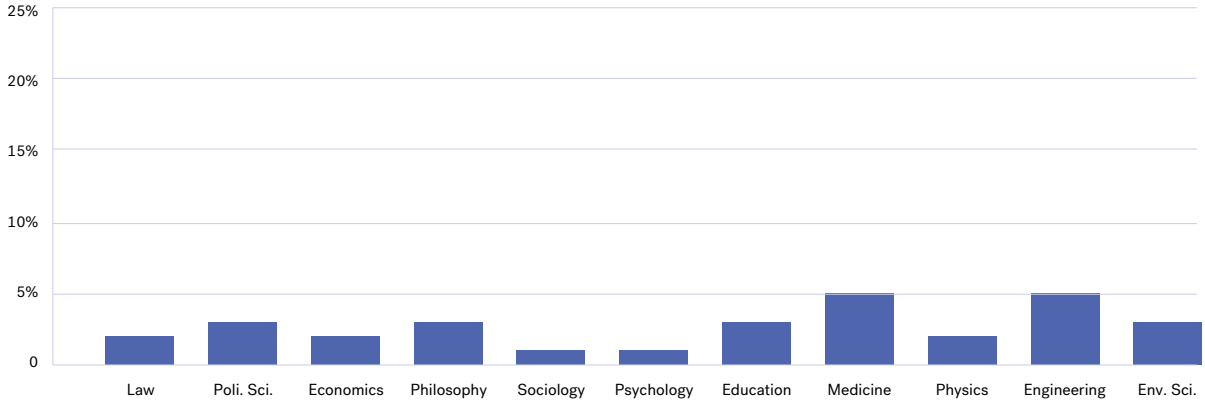
From its earliest days, the university was one of the most critical points of influence for future generations.

[3] Hyojoung Kim and Steven Pfaff, "Structure and Dynamics of Religious Insurgency: Students and the Spread of the Reformation," American Sociological Review 77, no. 2 (2012).

1. Under-representation of Christians in a variety of disciplines and areas.

Our research indicates that in the mainstream academy, among traditionally-ranked top 40 institutions, Christians comprise less than 5 percent of the professoriate, and in the humanities, often less than 2 percent. See figure below.

CHRISTIAN FACULTY REPRESENTATION



Source: 2013 interviews with IV staff and Christian professors at 40 top schools, conducted by Veritas staff

There are many reasons for the under-representation, but the arguments found in Mark Noll's "epistle from a wounded lover" still holds true today. His 1994 Scandal of the Evangelical Mind was a clarion call to the church to encourage future scholars and intellectual depth, and much work remains. In his recent book Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind, Noll writes "If it is true that the Word became flesh, it must also be true that the realm that bore the Word, the realm of flesh, is worthy of the most serious consideration... Whatever may be the actual intellectual practice of Christian believers, the Christian faith contains all the resources, and more, required for full-scale intellectual engagement."[5]

If the church is to flourish over the next fifty years and beyond, engaging the lost and discipling future generations, we must love Christ with our minds with the same fervor as we would with our hearts and souls.

[4] Source: Faculty Survey, Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA (1990-2014), compiled by Heterodox Academy

[5] Mark Noll. Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011.

Spencer Lawrenz and Barbara Nicolosi, *Behind the Scene: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film, and Culture*

[6] (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005)

http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-10-20-evangelical-journalists_N.html

2-5%
Christian professors as a percentage of faculty at top 40 universities

2. Where they do exist, Christians are often siloed and fragmented. In the mainstream academy we have found that Christian academics are often siloed from each other. We found few examples of Christians in the same discipline collaborating to generate an intellectual effort that is formed by a Christian understanding of the world. This is not to say that Christian faculty are not gathering in the academy for fellowship. That is certainly happening, in some places very effectively, and marks a significant step forward from previous decades. However, in our research, we have found few examples of Christian academics working together on targeted projects for the purpose of upstream Gospel influence. Where such projects are taking place, they tend to be small in scale.

Outside of the Christian sphere, there are a number of contemporary examples of dense network formation that we might learn from. Indeed, many recent examples of social movements, as well as movements within industries, have been energized by the upstream collaborative efforts of convened thought leaders. One immediately thinks of the Davos World Economic Forum, The Aspen Institute, and The Global Technology Summit in Jackson Hole—mechanisms that have proven highly successful for aligning leaders around common purposes.

Which raises the question: “What would it take to convene and align Christian thought leaders to work alongside the ground game of local churches for long-term fruitfulness?”

Within recent American history there are certainly some examples of targeted collaboration that has produced compelling results. The 2017 Templeton Prize Winner, philosopher Alvin Plantinga, provides one such example. Plantinga began his career in the early 1950s with a small cohort of young Christian philosophers during a time when Christians were almost non-existent in academic philosophy. Together, they planned their work to systematically engage the upstream ideas in philosophy that presented barriers to faith in God. Reflecting on his career, Plantinga testifies to the power of collaboration within a discipline for advancing an apologetic for faith. Now, 50 years later, thousands of philosophers make arguments for God within the context of mainstream academic philosophy, and the Association of Christian Philosophers is a prominent presence in the philosophical academy. Most importantly, the assumption that one cannot be a serious Christian and a serious philosopher has been all but overturned.

What might it look like if collaboration like this could take place in other disciplines and around other key questions of our day?

3. **The lack of role models in turn perpetuates limited development pipelines for the next generation of leaders.** Contributing to the underrepresentation and fragmentation is the lack of established development pipelines for emerging Christian thought leaders in culture—the modern equivalent to the *paedeia* schools of Rome. Several programs in recent American history stand out as examples, but only a few of these still operate today. In the 1990's, the Mustard Seed Foundation initiated the Bakke and Harvey Fellows programs, a scholarship designed to develop high potential Evangelical undergraduates and graduate students at top academic institutions.

   After a successful run of more than a decade, the Bakke Fellowship was discontinued. The Harvey Fellowship continues today but is limited to 12 graduate students per year. The Pew Younger Scholarship program is another shining example, connecting rising undergraduate and graduate academics with Christian mentors—a program several distinguished academics have called the most effective program of its kind. However, after an effective run of over a decade, it was also discontinued.

   There are certainly other programs that have had impact as well—but our observation in talking with dozens of Christian professors across the country is that there is a strong need and desire for more development.

What would it take to reestablish the old development pipelines for Christian thought leaders and create new ones?

Although not a Christian example, a very successful development pipeline for a particular discipline and intellectual program is the Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Fellowship for emerging healthcare leaders. This program matches emerging healthcare leaders with established policy practitioners to accelerate the public influence and contribution of the healthcare fellows. Over the past decade, graduates of this fellowship have continued to work together to engage on the shape of healthcare policy.

This raises the question: “What would it take to reestablish the old development pipelines for Christian thought leaders and create new ones?”

Dangerous Minds: Christian Tutors in the Roman Empire

In the Roman Empire, young leaders were shaped through a rigorous education system called the *paedeia*. It included logic, grammar, history, literature, rhetoric, and ethics—both character and knowledge were imparted through this education. It was also a form of patronage, where well established civic and imperial leaders would groom future talent for their needs.

Early on, the church realized the importance of shifting the education and formation of the young leaders in the Empire. The pagan doctrines taught truths at odds with the Gospel; as just one example, compassion and mercy were not virtues in Roman and Greek ethical systems but central to the Christian doctrine of grace. From the second century through the fourth, there was an increasing apologetic to respond to pagan education and offer a compelling alternative vision. "Schools were established by the end of the second century in all of the major urban areas of the Mediterranean, in most cases by the leading Christian intellectuals who resided there."[7] These schools were not marginal efforts, but substantial centers of learning with intellectual heft in their own right.

The impact was seen in the increasing response of pagan philosophers to Christian doctrine over the next 200 years. Initially ignored, then derided, Christian philosophy rapidly became the central intellectual challenge to the classical pagan writers and consumed much of the philosophical debate in the third and fourth centuries.

As Christian intellectual capability increased, the Christian schools were able to shift the *paedeia* into a set of character formations more consistent with church doctrine. Many local bishops became responsible for their local *paedeia*. This was powerful, because Christian virtues were being incorporated into the formation of leaders of the Roman Empire. In backlash, Emperor Julian (affectionately known as the Apostate) "made it illegal for Christians to teach the classics. This meant that upper-class parents had to choose between sending their offspring to be instructed by pagans or deny them the opportunity to acquire 'the language, the looks, the innumerable coded signals that were absorbed unconsciously with classical paideia [without which] Christian children would not have been able to compete in the elite culture of classical antiquity, as Julian knew full well."[8]

Julian's reign was short-lived and after his death the restrictions were lifted. Over time the *paedeia* evolved into the Christian catechesis, which was available to all, regardless of social class or status, a revolutionary concept in antiquity.

[7] See, James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*
[8] See, Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*

Recommendations

What should the Church do?

Going forward, we believe there are several strategic interventions that we should make to bolster dense networks that could contribute to the church flourishing in the years ahead. Those potential interventions include the following:

I. Invest earlier in leadership development, vision casting, and formation for high-potential Christian undergraduates

II. Encourage more Christian scholars to enter the academy as a calling equal to ministry or professional vocations, and strengthen collaboration within disciplines.

III. Launch a regular convening to gather cross-disciplinary groups of Christians, to develop long-term approaches to emerging societal needs

IV. Increase long-horizon philanthropic investments in leadership development

I. Invest earlier in leadership development, vision casting, and formation for high-potential Christian undergraduates

Investing early in high potential undergraduates can have long-term, generational impact. One reason for this is that many high-influence professions disproportionately reward those individuals who focus early and execute with a long-term, dedicated effort. The academy is a prime example, along with medicine, journalism, law, and finance. We believe that identifying high potential Christian undergraduates early and investing in their vocational and spiritual development could have a significant, long-term effect. A few ways to do this could include:

- Awarding undergraduate research fellowships for high potential students interested in exploring a future in the academy—similar to the Pew Emerging Scholars model. These targeted fellowships would provide research or independent study funding for student and professor pairings where both are thoughtfully engaged Christians. This would not only fund relevant research, but just as importantly provide opportunities for increased mentorship and apprenticeship between Christian undergraduates and faculty.

- Investing to mentor and develop young student voices. Many future thought leaders show their talents and convictions as

undergraduates. The emerging Augustine Collective sponsored by the Veritas Forum is an example of this investment, training young Christian thinkers and writers for the public square and the academy.

- An annual gathering for 50 to 100 high potential students each summer to interact with and learn from a cross-disciplinary cohort of Christian leaders within the academy, journalism, finance, and similar professions. Selections would consider academic and professional credentials as well as recommendations from pastors, ensuring that student cohorts represent the future of the church.

II. Encourage more Christian scholars to enter the academy as a calling equal to ministry or professional vocations, and strengthen collaboration within disciplines

We need to increase the pipeline of graduate students who can engage in their disciplines with rigor and nuance. Catholic institutions like Notre Dame have produced scholars who contribute to the disciplines, and in many ways have provided the intellectual heft for many Evangelical public voices. Nevertheless, across every discipline, as the previous figure makes clear, we have not "sustained serious intellectual life" to the degree needed. We also need to catalyze those who are there to increase their collaboration across and within disciplines. Potential models could include:

- Continued investments in sustaining and growing programs like the Harvey Fellows program and the highly successful Pew Emerging Scholars program. Both programs have had a significant long-term impact by helping high-potential Christian graduate students pursue academic careers while building relationships with peers and mentors. Both programs have demonstrated long-term success and whether in the same or new forms, need to continue to be expanded.

- Invest in building out anchor hubs of many Christian faculty, administrators, and local churches and campus ministries at one or more leading research universities and academic intuitions, following the Notre Dame model of dense networks of Catholic and Catholic-friendly scholars. To do this well would require significant investments in funded professorships, university centers, and other methods of institution building. Fortunately there are a few major universities today that do have some of those pieces already in place, including Washington University in St. Louis, The University of Virginia, and Duke University.

- Equip and catalyze faculty across disciplines to engage policy makers and the broader public discourse. Targeted trainings and fellowships could provide media engagement, OpEd writing, and public speaking training for early-tenured faculty at top universities. In addition, we believe there is a significant opportunity to launch a program modeled after approaches like we outlined above for graduate student and faculty development, to build deep networks within strategic disciplines and to help participants learn to effectively engage public policy arenas.

- Enable the knowledge agenda of innovative thought leaders through a MacArthur Genius Grant model. The grant program would prioritize leaders from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, bolstering the thought leadership needed for a diversifying church.

III. Launch a regular convening to gather cross-disciplinary groups of Christians, to develop long-term approaches to emerging societal needs

The pace of change in society is only increasing. Challenges confronting us in the coming years and decades will include a radically transformed economic and labor market due to automation and artificial intelligence, the rise of genetic engineering and bio-hacking, and the emergence of technologies that promise radical life extension and even transhumanism. We believe the church should be ready with compelling, theologically rigorous answers to the significant ethical questions these and other changes will provide. However, the answers to these questions won't come from individual practitioners or scholars, siloed within their respective disciplines.

To proactively develop rigorous answers to these emerging challenges, we should convene cross-disciplinary groups of Christians on an ongoing basis around one or more of these big questions. Disciplines represented can and should include theology, philosophy, public policy, the media, law, and business, amongst others. Secular leaders do this today frequently at gatherings like the World Economic Forum, Aspen Institute, and Sun Valley gatherings. We believe there is a significant need for leaders across the church to likewise gather together to benefit from the wisdom of Godly and diverse counsel.

IV. Increase long-horizon philanthropic investments in leadership development

One prevailing challenge with investing in long-term leadership development and culture care is just that: the outcomes and impact are often only seen years after the fact. To build sustained, long-term programs like the academic fellow programs requires dedicated philanthropic investments over a significant period of time. These investments should be based on tested and refined theories of change and vetted by the respective leaders in each discipline. Unfortunately, though, while output indicators may be near or mid-term, the outcomes and eventual impact could potentially be seen only decades after each investment. These are precisely the type of long-term investments best suited for institutionalized, philanthropic capital.

Chapter Seven

Counting the Cost

We have proposed many potential ways to engage in this unique moment in the history of the American church. There are no doubt more and better ideas—in fact, we hope this report fires the imagination of leaders and entrepreneurs with greater creativity than our own. This is only a starting point. In every area outlined we need to test, learn, and adapt as the Holy Spirit leads and as wisdom and evidence indicate. Many of the areas discussed already benefit from dedicated leaders working tirelessly to fulfill those missions. We need to come alongside and learn from them, building on the great work already underway. In many areas, more questions than answers remain.

We are confident on a few fronts, however. Without Christ's leading and the Holy Spirit working, our labor and hope will be in vain. We believe that intentional, visionary leadership and collaborative action—submitted to God's lordship and following His leading—will be essential to meeting these needs. Rising to this task will be costly beyond the financial. We will need to challenge ourselves to build new habits, give of our time and ability, and change some of our mindsets.

While this report is commissioned for, and written by, a funder, we also want to stress that money is not the primary driver of impact. It will take:

- **Prayer, prayer, and more prayer.** We cannot stress how important it will be to increase prayer for many of the efforts discussed previously. Without prayer, we believe we will labor in vain.

- **Coalitions of the willing.** We need many partners working collaboratively within each area over a sustained period of years. Evangelicals and Catholics have had a sustained witness in society on issues of life and human dignity; we need to find ways to sustain effort over multiple decades in areas like the academy, church planting, and social entrepreneurship. We need to ensure longevity in these efforts, organizations, and funding streams.

- **Voice.** We need leaders across the American church to rally their flocks and preach from their pulpits about this unique moment in history. We need more of us to inspire young people to go on mission with Christ. The church has inspired a generation in previous moments; the 10/40 window and small groups are recent examples. We need that same moment now.

- **Resources.** It will certainly cost money as well. We will need more financial resources, and in certain areas, more focused spending. While money will be needed, we believe that is fundamentally solvable if we are inspired to meet this opportunity head on. If prayer, collaborative leadership, and voices are present, the money will follow.

What It Might Cost

As we say, we think the funding is solvable; the American church has large pools of wealth already present and arguably an inexhaustible source if we are mission aligned. However, we do think it's worthwhile to briefly outline what it might cost. These are of course high-level estimated ranges.

I. Starting New Churches

To double or even triple the rate of U.S. church planting in the coming years will likely require the following actions and investments:

Vision casting to recruit and unleash more church planters • A significant messaging push across denominations and church movements to raise awareness of the need for many more church planters • Focus on church planters without a traditional four-year college or a three-year seminary degree • Focus and build new church plants from day one to be focused on the next plant within a multiplication strategy	**~$5M–$10M+**[1]
Increase and strengthen multi-platform and virtual training offerings for church planters • Digital-first training platforms and modules • Cross-denomination and network church planting boot camps	~$10–$20M+[2] ~$50M–$100M+[3]
Invest in mixed-platform apprentice models • Significant apprenticeship experiences for as many church planters as possible • Virtual apprenticeship or cohort models	~$2M–$5M+[4] ~$10M–$20M+
Catalyze the necessary funding for church planting • Launch a crowdfunding platform for new church plants • Launch a matching funds program from institutional donors • Start a REIT (or REITs) that purchases and holds properties ideally suited for church plants	~$10M–$20M+ up to $50M–$100M+ per year[5] up to hundreds of millions[6]
Invest in an online hub or app-based approach that pulls many of these pieces together to mobilize church planting	**~$10M–$20M+**[7]

II. Mission for Youth

To catalyze, train, and equip thousands of parents and churches to help disciple and retain tens of millions of youth will likely require the following:

Equip and mobilize whole churches to foster youth formation • A challenge grant or X Prize model for church leaders (and youth!) who pilot new, scalable programming that incorporate youth as integral participants, alongside adults, in multiple areas of the church's core ministry • Seminary, pastoral training, and new members programming that teaches youth formation as a central mission of the church • Church-wide, scalable mentorship programs as a part of the core ministry model • A multigenerational catechesis guide, designed for parents and children to benefit from alike, providing discussion guides and leadership advice for parents as they lead	~$2M–$10M+ ~$2M–$10M+ ~$2M–$10M+ ~$1M–$5M+
Provide parents with tools for teaching their children • App-based and gamified resources that make catechetical questions easy to incorporate into dinner time conversations and free time • Tailored resources for parents to use directly for family-based youth formation	~$1M–$5M+ ~$2–$5M+
Equip and send youth into missions A gap-year program prior to college that is strong on cross-cultural evangelism and integration into a church plant	~$2M–$10M+[8,9]
Build a national advocacy movement	~$2M-$10M+

[1] Assumes basic resource development, marketing, conferences, and convenings, etc., over several years.
[2] Assumes not just upfront platform development costs, but ongoing resource and training module creation as well as some real-time, online lectures and classes, etc.
[3] To provide a month-long boot camp training experience for 2,000 new church planters per year will require at least $5M–$10M in spend per year.
[4] This assumes the cost of launching an apprenticeship matching program to connect would-be planters to church planting hub churches, etc. This does not include the direct costs for each apprentice. We assume those costs would be fundraised by each apprentice, or the sending church.
[5] Costs for planting a church can vary widely depending on urban or rural geography as well as whether the planter is full time or bivocational. We believe a range of models are needed. The average annual costs of an urban church plant are $100k–$200k, while for suburban or rural churches that number is estimated at $75k–$100k per year. On average, the amount of outside funding a new plant needs to reach sustainability is likely $150,000–$300,000+. For the purposes of this estimate we assume an average of $200,000. Therefore, to go from 4,000 plants a year to 8,000 or 10,300 successful church plants per year, the American church may need to mobilize as much as an additional $800M to $1+B per year above current church planting investments. We can imagine matching grants to help catalyze new funding streams from denominations, networks, or churches.
[6] Investing in real estate in urban centers well suited to church use could cost hundreds of millions alone, incremental to other direct church planting costs.
[7] This spend estimate is duplicative to some of the interventions outlined above and meant to propose an approach that aggregates some of the spend in online platform development.
[8] We believe that designing and launching a program like this at scale could have significant launch costs. However, we assume that the costs for each gap year participant (e.g., living costs) would be individually fundraised and therefore have not fully costed those within this aggregate estimate. If we were to include those costs, the total would be in the hundreds of millions over the next 20 years.
[9] These costs could also be included within the national advocacy movement costs below, depending on scoping and approach.

III. Reaching New Audiences

Create a strong, outward facing digital brand and platform A best-in-class website, mobile first, with a range of high quality responses to common questions, presented in various sharable formats; online chats and mentors for those with questions; invest in search and social so the website is the top hit for common questions translated globally into dozens of languages	**~$3M–$10M+**
Launch a studio that produces high quality multimedia content optimized for sharing through social networks. A production studio that cultivates young storytelling talent to communicate Christian ideas and themes via social media platforms	**~$10–$50M+**
Provide social media resources for thoughtful Christian pastors and public voices	**~$2M –$5M+**
Improve the online presence of local churches in their neighborhoods with virtual training	**~$2M–$5M+**

IV. Care for the Poor

Significantly increase church-driven care for the poor	**tens of millions**[10]
• Launch a crowdfunding application, with related resources, informed and designed by behavioral economists, for local churches to use within their congregations to spur increased charitable giving	~$5M–$20M+
• Challenge or matching grants for any local church giving a certain percentage of their funding to care for the poor	~$10M–$50M+
• Deploy resources that can help churches communicate a vision for caring for the poor within their congregation, helping mobilize additional funding	~$2M–$5M+
Increase the effectiveness of church-driven care for the poor via investments in leadership, collaboration and more effective tools	~$15M–$25M+
• Hubs and training centers in every major city to launch and train Christian social entrepreneurs	~$15M–$25M+
• Better regional and local collaboration across like-minded churches to care for the poor	~$1M–$5M+
• Incorporate effective and theologically grounded resources for caring for the poor and widows into seminary and church planting training resources	

[10] We believe that investments here to build out resources for churches and to make targeted seed investments could mobilize hundreds of millions or more in increased giving by local congregations.

Targeted PR and awareness building to help society understand the significant work the church is already doing	**$2M–$20M+**

V. Building Long-term Witness

To launch and mobilize dense networks of Christians who can care for culture and foster a world where the Gospel is considered credible, plausible, and relevant to address the challenges of the 21st century will likely require:

Invest earlier in leadership development, vision casting and formation for high-potential Christian undergraduates	
• Award undergraduate research fellowships for high potential students interested in exploring a future in the academy	~$2M–$10M+ [11]
• Invest to mentor and develop young student voices for the public square	~$2M–$10M+ [12]
• An annual gathering for 50 to 100 high-potential students each summer	~$2M–$10M+ [13]
Invest in launching more Christians within the academy and strengthened collaboration within disciplines	
• Sustain and grow a pipeline of promising undergraduate and graduate student scholars and thought leaders by resourcing a prestigious fellowship program	~$5M–$20M+
• Anchor hubs of many Christian faculty, administrators, and local churches and campus ministries at one or more leading research universities, following the Notre Dame model of dense networks of Catholic and Catholic friendly scholars	~$25M–$100M+ [14]
• Equip and catalyze faculty across disciplines to engage policy makers and the broader public discourse	~$2M–$8M+
• Enable the knowledge agendas of emerging scholars from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, using a MacArthur Genius Grant model	~$5M–$20M+
Launch a regular convening to gather cross-disciplinary groups of Christians to develop long-term approaches to emerging societal needs, connecting scholars with leading practitioners and institutional leaders	**~$2M–$10M+**

[11] The cost here could be as low as $200k+ per year, with the total cost depending on the number of years.
[12] The cost here could be as low as $300k+ per year, with the total cost depending on the number of years.
[13] The cost here could be as low as $300k+ per year, with the total cost depending on the number of years.
[14] For example, the average cost of endowing one professorship is ~$1.5M–$3M depending on the university. To truly build one or more anchor universities, there would need to be considerable spend.

Epilogue

Final Thoughts

We stand in the midst of a unique time in the life of the American church. There are more ideas than we have resources; more opportunities than we have leaders; more needs than we have workers. If we ended up in the worse case scenario, and some trends suggest that direction, 42 million youth raised in the church will simply drift away, never to return.

It does not have to be this way.

Over the course of the project, one particular story from Jesus' life kept coming to mind. The elite of His day approached Him. They kept asking Him for a sign, to prove His divinity. Jesus' response? Small talk. He remarked about the weather. His interrogators were good at reading the clouds in the sky, He observed; based on that, they could make pretty solid short-term meteorological forecasts.

So why couldn't they see what was happening on the ground?

The Pharisees were blind to the indicators of the singular historical moment in which they lived. The signs and wonders, the spiritual revival, the political ferment, the prophecies fulfilled, the thousands following a man in the desert. Those were just aberrations. It didn't fit their understanding of the world. It would pass. Things would go back to how they always were. The remnant would still be able to worship as they had before.

Christ marveled at their imperceptibility! He left them, frustrated they could not comprehend that they were living at the very hinge of history.

At this moment in time we are privileged to have the tools and resources to understand the state of Christianity in our country. We are given the ability to discern the probable departure of tens of millions of our children and grandchildren away from a life with Jesus. And if the trends hold, it will be a large and lasting portion of our country who will not know Christ. If we are willing to read the data, the hints in our cities and churches, it is apparent.

So all of us as the American church face a crucial test. Can we discern the times in which we live and respond as God would have us? Or will we miss our moment?

In complete candor, we have two fears from this work, having spoken with so many who have encouraged us along the way and given us insight into the American church.

The first fear is that the scale of the project in front of us is so large that it could paralyze us. Particularly those who are not ready for the work ahead. It is a large task. It means change. It means great sacrifice, tiring effort, and it will not be familiar or comfortable. We will need to do some things differently, and different is very, very hard. We will need, in some cases, new wineskins. It will mean working together in ways and places that we have not historically. Left unchanged, the work of the American church could continue into greater decline because what we face is too much. There will be those, and how many we do not know, who are not ready for a new adventure.

The second fear is our greater concern. It is that the problem is not our problem. That the loss of so many from a life with Christ is God's judgement on weak churches and a corrupt culture. That those who leave were never truly followers of Jesus, and the way is narrow. That as long as my family, or at least most of them, make it onto the ark, let the flood take the world. It is a hard heartedness. It is a people whose hearts do not break for the lost, for a world that God

Can we discern the times in which we live and respond?

so loved that He spared not even His own Son for it. We worry greatly that in a time of polarization, of echo chambers and fearful rage, that we have forgotten how to love the world. We wonder what our church today would look like if Edwards, Wesley, Whitefield, Asbury, Allen, Seymour, or Graham had harder hearts. We wonder if our love has grown not so much cold as defensive and inward. This we do not know how to solve apart from prayer and fasting.

We need to be a people who would leave the 59 to save the 41. That numbers like 16, 22, 35, 42 million break our hearts and bring us to tears because those numbers are the very people with whom God has placed us and called us to love. They are sheep without a shepherd, and we can introduce them to the Greatest of all Shepherds.

We need to be a people who would leave the 59 to save the 41.

Despite these fears, we are deeply hopeful. Hope is a uniquely Christian virtue, because we have hope in a God who is ultimately redeeming His creation and bringing His first and best intention to us despite our brokenness. We have hope because He is at work, not us.

We are hopeful. There is much good in our churches. There are millions of faithful followers of Jesus in the cities and towns of this great country. There are extraordinary pastors, evangelists, teachers, missionaries, parents, professors; future saints waiting to be called forward into greater love. We have churches that show God's manifold, unifying, confounding love across race and tongue; who care for the poor as if it was the very person of Christ they serve; who train the next generation with such passion and joy that it might last a hundred years.

If we can, as leaders in our churches across our country, help them to see the times, to lead them into the call of Jesus, to live the Gospel faithfully, we believe we can see a great move of God in America.

We write this report in great humility; we certainly do not believe that we, or anyone apart from God, can have all of the answers. This report is a starting point for a conversation that we hope will continue for years to come, in ways and places that only He can foresee. But the work must be done nonetheless. We must discern our moment in God's story and what part we all might play.

We encourage—in fact plead with—the American church, particularly our younger leaders—to recognize the significance of this moment and work collectively for God's glory. This is our Great Opportunity.

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