

Three Important Church Trends

by Ed Stetzer¹



I am often asked about the future of the church and, as much as I wish I knew the future, I don't. What I do have, however, is an accumulation of research, access to some of the best ministry thinkers and leaders across a spectrum of denominations and movements, and a critical eye on the ebb and flow of church culture. So, in looking at the trends in our churches, here are three I believe are worth taking note of today.

1. Decline:

Everywhere are tales of the decline of the American church. Some doomsayers are predicting evangelicalism will die in a decade. This type of Chicken Little-ism is unnecessary.

The truth is that, yes, there is decline among self-identified Christians in America. According to the latest American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), the number of self-professing Christians is down 11 percent over two decades. But, that same ARIS study also revealed an actual rise in the number of evangelicals.

There are concerns — and I would say that we are increasingly losing our "home field advantage" in our culture. Yet, Christianity is not in collapse. It is, however, declining in influence and increasingly being marginalized in culture.

To address the trend, we need a renewed vision and passion for God's mission in our churches.

2. Dropouts:

Like the decline trend, the dropout trend is both troubling and troublesome. It is troubling because it is an ongoing trend. Young adults are dropping out of the church at a disturbing rate after graduating high school. But, again, although it is troublesome, the data is not as scary as some proclaim.

Our LifeWay Research data has places the dropout number at 70 percent. But this number is not as definite as it sounds. It is not as if 70 percent of all young adults vanish in some kind of reverse rapture. More specifically, 70 percent of young adults who were active for at least one year in high school drop out for at least one year between 18-22. Half of those who leave stay gone. But then, half of those who leave return. Among evangelical churches, the number of dropouts is also lower.

To address the trend, we need parents and churches to get serious about equipping students to live their faith.

3. Discipleship

Or lack thereof. The elephant in the Christian church today is that we are not seeing robust disciple-making taking place. You are more likely to find evangelicals affirming that there is more than one way to get to heaven today than you were 15 or 20 years ago. Why? We've done great at getting them in the door, but we've done terrible at actually growing them up and grounding them in the faith.

¹ Follow more of Ed Stetzer's thoughts on his blog: - <http://www.edstetzer.com>

Many churches are now rediscovering ways to push more depth from the Sunday morning stage, better ways to assimilate the crowds into small groups and discipling relationships, more organic ways to nurture spiritual formation, and stronger ways to create missional expansion in their communities and around the world.

To address the trend, we need to get serious about teaching believers who they are in Christ and how they are to live that out.

Trends matter — we look at them to see where we are and they help us to consider what we should be doing. With God's grace and discerning leadership, we can address these trends in biblically driven ways as we engage the future together.

