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'By 2050, 10% of Americans will attend church'

by G. Jeffrey MacDonald by Religion News Service

Booming megachurches might grab headlines, but the bigger story of American congregations is one of accelerating decline, according to David T. Olson, director of the American Church Research Project. Based on data collected from more than 200,000 churches, he projects that by 2050, only 10 percent of Americans will be in church on any given Sunday.

Olson, who's also director of church planting for the Evangelical Covenant Church, analyzes the situation in his 2008 book, *The American Church in Crisis*. *Some answers have been edited for length.*

Q: Why do you say the American church is in crisis?

A: The big problem is America continues to grow in terms of population, but the percentage of Americans attending church on any given weekend keeps declining. In 1990, it was 20.4 percent. In 2000, it was 18.7. In 2007, it was 17.

Q: Polls suggest more than 40 percent of Americans are weekly churchgoers. Why the discrepancy between those findings and yours?

A: The pollsters ask people questions about what they've done in the past week. I look at who actually showed up, according to head counts taken during worship. I think head counts are much more accurate. People want to look good for the pollster, causing something called the 'halo effect,' and that definitely happens when the subject is religion.

Q: Why is church attendance such a critical factor to measure?

A: Part of following Jesus is being connected in an authentic, consistent way with a group of Christians so that it's not just an individualistic act. It's a communal relationship with accountability. So when I see

that percentage going down, it lets me know that the number of people following Jesus in that way is diminishing in America.

Q: Are certain types of churches faring better than others?

A: Yes. Since 2001 especially, mainline and Catholic churches have been experiencing severe decline. They are declining much faster than they were in the 1990s. Evangelicals are still growing numerically, but that numeric growth is not keeping up with population growth.

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Q: What accounts for the decline that you're describing?

A: Churches tend to stay pretty stable. So even though the community around them may be growing or be in transition with new people coming in regularly, churches often don't notice those things happening and are pretty happy to just stay the same. From 1990 to 2006, there were 68 million new births in America and a net gain of 23 million immigrants, but churches a lot of times are really not looking outside their doors to think about how to connect with those new Americans.

Q: Is the problem mostly a matter of style? Are evangelicals doing better because they're often more amenable to using new technologies and forms of worship?

A: Strategy and style are not the issue. The real issue today is: does a particular church have the ability to communicate the story of Jesus in a way that really connects with people? In my observation, American churches are not doing a very good job of thinking about how to tell that story in ways that really engage people in their communities.

Q: Are churches not reaching the unchurched? Or are they losing people who've just drifted away?

A: It's some of both. Christians are increasingly cocooned and live in environments where they may not know many people who are not Christians. And there are plenty of people who grew up in a church environment and now say, `you know, this just isn't working for me anymore.?

Q: What needs to happen for this crisis to be abated?

A: We have to understand how our culture is changing and what that means for communicating the gospel. We also need a lot of new churches. Just as in the business world, new businesses fuel innovation and new ideas and help the whole economy, the same thing is true with new churches being good for Christianity. And we need to recover the message of Jesus, particularly as his words and actions lived it out in the gospels. We've had a tendency to make that pretty narrow and not really understand how big and powerful it is.

Q: If many churches are not full on Sunday morning, then why not focus on filling the empty pews before building new structures and new communities?

A: It's probably five to seven times easier to plant a new church than to help an established church that's in deep difficulty to restore its vitality. I wouldn't discourage established churches from doing that, but it's much more fruitful and efficient to plant new churches.

Q: Is it important then for denominations and congregations to be actively closing churches in

order to make room for new ones?

A: I would encourage every church to try to do a great job of serving Christ in their communities. But churches reach a point where they realize they've lost vision and energy. They just don't have what it takes to do it anymore. I think there is a way for them to honor the great ministry they've had in the past but say, `you know, it's maybe time for us to close down and use our resources to help some new expressions of Christianity come to birth.? That's what I would encourage denominations to do.

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