

By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

A new book shines a much more intense spotlight on what is actually happening in the American Church today, and its conclusions are especially unnerving. David Olson, author of [The American Church in Crisis](#), uses the exhaustive research of "The American Church Research Project (TACRP)" to find the most accurate statistics available on the health or lack of such of the church.

First of all, he found that the rather optimistic estimates of church attendance in America to be wildly inaccurate. He says that while the Gallup Poll estimates that some 40% of all Americans are in worship on weekends, and while researcher George Barna raises this amount to 43%, the statistical analysis shows that actual attendance is less than half of what the polls suggest.

Olson begins with the conviction, (which I share) that worship attendance is the most helpful indicator of the American spiritual climate. He also asserts that when the pollsters come calling, Americans largely inflate their worship involvement, perhaps indicating what they would like their worship life to be, not what it actually is. Both the Journal for Scientific Study of Religion and the American Church Research Project show that just about 17.5% of Americans attended a Christian church on any given weekend in 2005.

Breaking down the statistics further, here is what the data demonstrates. If you measure an active member of a church as one who worships three out of every eight Sundays, in other words more than once a month, the data shows that 23% of Americans are regular participants. Twenty-three percent not only profess their faith in Jesus Christ, but they live out their faith in active participation in the life of the church.

Of course, the other number is staggering. This means that 77% of Americans do not meet this definition. Seventy-seven percent do not have a consistent life-giving connection with the local congregation.

Another way of examining church connections asks the question, "How many people attend church less than once a month and occasionally donate money to that church?" You can add an additional 14% to the 23%. In other words 37% of Americans are considered active members of churches, although only 17% are in worship on any given weekend.

Pushing this one step further, there are many who claim membership in a church but never attend. Some may have moved, some may be dead, but 15% is the best estimate. This means that 52% of Americans are considered to be members of congregations, even though just 17% are in worship on a given weekend.

Olson also examines the trajectory of American churches by comparing it with national population trends. Is the church keeping up with American growth? In the past one hundred years the U.S. has expanded by 100 million people, from 200 to 300 million. We have grown by 52 million from 1990 to 2006.

How much has church attendance grown since 1990? Zero. Zippo. In 1990, 52 million people attended worship on a weekend; in 2006 the number remained unchanged. Thus the percentage of Americans who attended church declined from 20.4% in 1990 to 17.5% in 2005.

Evangelical churches almost kept up with population growth, declining only from 9.2% to 9.1%. Mainline church attendance declined from 3.9% to 3.0%, a decline of 24%. Roman Catholics declined from 7.2% to 5.3%, which is a loss of 26%.

We who live in the Midwest tend to think that our region of the country does better than many other places. We also know that we have the densest Lutherans in the country, and church attendance is quite high in our region. But the research is not comforting; in no single state in America did church attendance keep up with population growth.

More specifically, in terms of mainline denominations, which is Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, United Church of Christ, Reformed Church, Episcopalian, etc. here are the statistics:

Iowa mainline churches declined 10%. Minnesota mainline declined 10.4%. Wisconsin mainline declined 8.4%. Illinois mainline declined 10.4%. Missouri mainline declined 8.3%. Nebraska mainline declined 10.3%. Arizona mainline declined 17.6%. Florida mainline declined 13.8%. Texas mainline declined 12.1%. California mainline declined 13.2%.

Looking closer at the numbers, in 2000, 9.5 million Americans attended mainline congregations. By 2005, this number had declined to 8.8%. The ELCA had 1,583,000 worshipping regularly in 1990, it had dropped to 1,561,000 in 2000 and then to 1,413,000 in 2005. Olson predicts that with this present rate of decline the ELCA will only worship 1,298,000 by 2010.

As a group, mainline congregations are projected to decline by 14% in attendance in this decade, a loss of well over one million. Why the sharp decline? Why the depressing projections? Olson makes five observations.

1. Mainline denominations are made up of primarily older congregations, and those congregations are declining consistently.
2. The human sexuality discussion is negatively affecting mainline churches.

3. Mainline denominations face a severe shortage of new churches. Only 10% of new congregations started in the U.S. are mainline, the rest are evangelical.
4. If the ELCA wants to just maintain its present size, it would need to plant eight times as many churches a year as we presently do. At present, the new churches planted by the ELCA each year only add 3100 new attendees per year. Fifty years ago, mainline denominations were very good at planting new churches. However, these fifty year old churches are facing severe generational challenges. Most of them cannot reach young people. The sharpest decline in congregations today are in those started between 1954 and 1966.
5. Leaders of mainline denominations do not seem to be able to understand and articulate the root problems that mainline churches face. Often they talk about birthrates and demographics yet make no structural changes to stop the decline.

3. The best pattern for the mission of the church is the early church, adopting its attitude, model and mission strategy.
4. Pastors need to upgrade ministry gifts and learn to articulate the message and mission of Jesus with passion, power and wisdom.
5. Christians must engage their neighbors with humble and listening attitudes. A great way is to recover the historic Christian ministry of hospitality.
6. Established churches must embrace church planting as a primary method of passing the faith onto future generations.
7. Denominations need to develop huge new church planting strategies.
8. Pastors and leaders need to develop more energy at raising up and training young leaders in their churches, colleges and community organizations.
9. The church needs to recognize anew the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.
10. Christian leaders and churches need to accept and learn to thrive in the new world that is post-Christian, postmodern and multi-ethnic.

Two more set of statistics about Lutherans give us pause:

We see the upper Midwest as Lutheran country. Sure enough, the percentage of people attending a Lutheran church on a given weekend in 2005 include: Iowa 3.8%, Minnesota 6.6%, North Dakota 8.8%, South Dakota 7.0%, Nebraska 4.8%, Wisconsin 5.5%, Missouri 1.2%, Illinois 1.4%. By way of comparison, in California it is 0.4%, in Texas 0.5%, in Florida 0.4% and the lowest in Mississippi 0.1%.

From 2000 to 2005, Lutheran worship attendance declined in all adjacent states. The actual decline Iowa 13.8%, Minnesota 8.3%, North Dakota 12.2%, South Dakota 9.6%, Nebraska 11.7%, Kansas 11.5%, Wisconsin 8.5%, Illinois 11.0% and Missouri 5.1%.

Mainline congregations are not the only denominations losing worshippers. Roman Catholics declined in worship attendance from 2000 to 2005, Iowa 10.6%, Minnesota 11.8%, Wisconsin 22.6%, Illinois 10.0%, Missouri, 13.2%, and Kansas 10.1%.

Not everyone is declining. Baptist churches grew in all adjacent states from 2000 to 2005. Iowa 17.5%, Minnesota 2.9%, Nebraska 23.3%, Illinois 9.0%, Missouri 5.1%, and Kansas 5.9%.

Pentecostals grew as well, Iowa 18.9%, Minnesota 9.8%, Nebraska 8.4%, South Dakota 16.0%, Illinois 12.9%, and Kansas 5.9%.

In his summary, Olson says that ten things need to happen to reverse the trends:

1. Christian leaders need to be honest about what is happening in the American church and personally lead the church forward with spirituality, chemistry, and strategy.
2. Established churches need to have the courage and commitment to pursue both health and growth.

For more information, go to www.theamericanchurch.org/TACIC.

Olson concludes by offering what he thinks the message of the church should be:

- Evangelism - proclaiming the message of forgiveness in Christ, reconciliation with God
- Ministry - help people break the bonds that hold and oppress them, prayer and healing
- Spiritual formation - help people live a new, resurrected life through the Holy Spirit
- Love - become a compassionate countercultural force through mercy and justice
- Community - provide place for love, support and accountability for each other