

# Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: December 30, 2012

## The State of the American Church at the End of 2012

by Dan Trygg

“And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. <sup>38</sup> But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. <sup>39</sup> And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, ‘The old is good enough.’” Luke 5:37-39

“I am the Vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you might bear much fruit, and might come to be My disciples.” John 15:5-8

If you read the articles about church growth in America in the past 50 years, it can be very disheartening. The church has not made any headway at all. In fact, it has been losing members, especially in some denominations.

**The church has lost the hearts, minds and respect of a growing number of people in our society.**

Certainly, we have been losing the “culture war”. The moral climate of the country has been eroding away. The media has desensitized us to where we hardly blink at things that would have been outrageous a generation ago. There is a loss of reverence and respect toward God. While many seem to be interested in spiritual things, the theology they have come to believe views God only in terms of love and forgiveness. The pluralism of our society has carried over into an acceptance of a wide menagerie of ideas. To hold to an absolute truth, or a clear sense of right and wrong, is often viewed as close-minded and intolerant. We are to *accept* people, and their beliefs, no matter how contradictory they are to biblical teachings. Acceptance and tolerance are the only recognized absolutes in our culture today.

**In the mind of most Americans, church is irrelevant. It is largely perceived as an institution of the past.**

People, especially young people, are not particularly interested. To them, church is boring, and a waste of their valuable time. The statistics bear this out. **The church in America is in decline. Currently, the median age of 60% of churchgoers is 60 years of age. It is an aging, dying institution.** The sad reality is that on many fronts, the American Church is struggling just to exist. With the difficulty churches have had in being able to attract or hold onto young people, this trend is going to be increasing.

**The number of local churches are going to dramatically decrease in the next 20-25 years.** Churches are dying and declining all over the country. George Barna recently reported that there is *no county* in the United States that is *more* churched than it was 10 years ago. C. Peter Wagner says that this has been going on for over 20 years. The church is not even keeping up with the population growth. In fact, one publication reported that the church in America has been losing 2,765,000 members per year. Only 1% of the churches in America are currently growing by actually leading unbelievers to Christ. Most church growth in America is the result of transfer from other churches. Currently, 3,500-4,000 churches close their doors every year. It is estimated that 80-85% of the churches in America have plateaued or are in decline. **Along with the loss of people, there is the reality that most church buildings were built decades ago. These facilities are also in decline and disrepair.** They are often inefficient, inflexible and expensive to maintain. Furthermore, they embody the traditionalism that so many younger people are rejecting. They are a liability that hampers fresher, more flexible and modern approaches to reach communities.

**The ratio of churches to the population has also declined over the past century.** In 1900, there were 27 churches for every 10,000 people. By 1950, that number had dropped to 17 churches per every 10,000, and at the end of the millennium it had fallen to only 11 churches for every 10,000 people. **That means that there are actually less churches available to choose from than was true a generation ago.**

Another reality is that **churches, as well as other organizations, tend to go through a life cycle.** There is birth, growth, decline and death. **Most American churches tend to plateau after about 15 years.** There is *initial growth and excitement*, a *missional drive* to reach out and win people to Christ. People are willing to do whatever it takes to meet, and get the job done. They sacrifice, and make due with less. Interestingly enough, this is the most effective and efficient time in a church's life cycle. *This stage is followed by a period of becoming “established”.* The church grows to where it can afford better facilities and materials. There is an excitement in the apparent prosperity and success of the mission. New facilities and materials tend to attract an influx of different people. Often these people are not the motivated pioneers of the earlier stage, but many are sincere and experience real growth and change. *Eventually, however, the focus changes from being outward to being inward, ...from reaching others to making things more comfortable and attractive.* Other people begin to attend who are often even less committed and not driven by a missionary mindset. They are spectators and pew sitters, ...people who attend, but do little more.

As time goes on, the inward focus increases until the church becomes ineffective in its real mission. After all, Christ commanded us to reach and train up disciples all around the world. If we are not doing that, we have lost our relevance. We become merely a gathering of people who are talking to ourselves, serving our own needs and interests. *We tend to lose touch with the surrounding culture.* Instead of seeing unbelievers as the lost and sick who need to be reached and served, we tend to look at them as the enemy. We see them as a threat to our established “churchianity”. Somewhere along this life cycle, we stop having a “go get ’em” mentality, and we develop a “they’re out to get us” mindset. Instead of drawing people with radical love and inexplicable joy, we drive them away with rules, behavioral expectations and religious protocols. Who wants to join a group of fear-based, negative people? *Often the concerns for beautifying and maintaining the facilities become more important than the people we are supposed to reach.* The church that was born out of a healthy, positive mission has all but become *unwelcoming* to people who “don’t know how to act in church”. **Any organization that has forgotten its original mission, and its customer service skills, is doomed.** Such a church is not only *ineffective*, it has become *offensive*, a detriment to the cause of Christ. **Unless there is a revival, ... a miraculous metamorphosis from the ugly worm it has become to the beautiful butterfly God intends His people to be..., it would be best for everyone if we let it die a natural death!**

**What is the problem?** What can we do? **The problem is that we tend to shift our focus away from following Christ.** Jesus stated it very clearly in John 15. If we abide in Him, we *will* bear much fruit. It is the branches that do *not* abide in Him that begin to wither and die. **Somewhere in the lifecycle of the typical church, people wander from a real, personal relationship with Christ, and they begin to “play church”. The same thing happens on a personal level. Some folks “play” at being Christians.** They go through the motions, but there is no depth or reality to their spiritual lives, or their walk with God. They may be disciplined. They may be moral. They are not, however, living radically for Jesus. **Their lives look no different than that of their unchurched neighbors, except for the religious activities they are involved in. What should they look like? They should have the fruit of the Spirit** (Gal. 5:22,23). Their lives should be characterized by radical love, inexpressible joy, incomprehensible peace, forbearing patience, gracious kindness, generous goodness, confident trust and dependable character, approachable gentleness and consistent self-mastery. Too often, what we see is selfish, small-minded people, who are impatient, fearful, cranky, intolerant, hypocritical, and ones whose lives are clearly out of control. If we are confident in God, should we be worried about conspiracy theories and speculations about the future? **The apostle John plainly tells us that if we abide in Christ we ought to look and act like Jesus** (I Jn. 2:6). We ought to be walking in love and according to the righteous commandments of God (I Jn. 2:3-5,9-11). We call those whose lives are not consistent with what they claim to believe “hypocrites”. **The word “hypocrite” was used in Jesus’ day for an “actor”.** Times have not changed. **That is what a hypocrite is today, as well, ...one who acts the part of a Christian in certain aspects of life, but who is inconsistent in other parts of his or her life.** There is no *power* in being a play actor. There is no *depth* or *reality* in it, ...and it does not take long to be found out. We are either living in the power of the flesh (keeping up a pretense by self-effort) or we are living by the genuine power of the Holy Spirit of God. **There are so many churchgoers who have never developed a genuine, vibrant spiritual life.** They have never truly learned to walk in the Spirit. **If your life is not filled to overflowing with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness and self-control then you are not walking in the Spirit. You are not abiding in Jesus. If you are not seeing answers to prayer, and fruitfulness in your life, then you are not walking and remaining in the life that comes from Jesus.**

**What can we do? It is time to humble ourselves, draw near to God and cry out.** It is time to press in harder, to go deeper. God *wants* to give you more than you have experienced, or what you have settled for. As God counseled His people in the OT, “**If My people who are called by My name shall humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land**” (2 Chronicles 7:14). “**Draw near to God** and He will draw near to you. **Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.** <sup>9</sup> Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.” (James 4:8-10). **It is the Father’s good pleasure to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him** (Lk. 11:9-13). Remember, this was *His* idea. Jesus called the Holy Spirit “the promise of the Father”. **We are not at all presuming upon God. No, we are getting with His plan.**

**Finally, we can start new groups.** C. Peter Wagner stated, “**The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.**” Virtually every time a new home church is planted, within a short time God will bring people to Christ. Part of effective discipleship training is to teach and model the NT plan for church growth, developing home groups. Wagner argues that **it is more productive to start new groups, than to attempt to revitalize older groups.** “Which is easier, to have new babies, or to raise the dead?”