

**Report to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon  
The Church at Litchfield Park, Litchfield Park, Arizona  
November 3, 2007  
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How's this for a headline? "Christianity No Longer Looks Like Jesus." This was the headline for a September 25, 2007 *Christian Post* article written by Audrey Barrick. The subhead read: "Young Americans today are more skeptical and resistant to Christianity than were people of the same age a decade ago."

A Religious News Service article by Adelle M. Banks for October 8, 2007 had this headline: "Study: Christians Seen as Judgmental, Anti-Gay." This article begins with these words: "Young people have graded Christianity, and so far, the report card doesn't look good."

Has this got your attention?

Both articles cited here refer to a recent report by the Barna Group, an evangelical research and polling organization. In turn, the Barna report cites a new book by its president David Kinnaman, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters*.

In a moment you will hear a raft of statistics about perceptions and beliefs relating to Christian doctrine and ecclesiology. But first, a personal confession. In 1999, when I accepted the call to be your Executive Presbyter, I had certain goals in mind for my tenure here. Not only would Grand Canyon Presbytery not close any existing churches during my term as EP, but we would start an average of one new church a year. Things have not worked out as I had hoped. We've closed two churches and folded a new church development. The only church we've chartered in the past eight years has been Goodyear Village on the Gila River Community. We chartered it with 36 members and as of the end of last year it was down to 16 members on the rolls.

It should come as no surprise that I've experienced bouts of discouragement about this decline, but instead of moping I've decided to invest time trying to find out what's going on. In the midst of a huge population boom, why are a large majority of our churches not growing? For the most part, our pastors have been faithful to their callings, but even with outstanding pastoral leadership, many of our congregations continue to decline. Why is this happening?

One often noted demographic phenomenon is that members of mainline denominations do not reproduce at the same levels as other segments of the American population. We tend to have fewer children. OK, that's true. But that doesn't explain everything. There's something else going on, something more basic.

The more digging I've done, the clearer it has become that a major shift is happening right now with regard to the content of religious belief. Changes have been rippling through the generations for more than half a century, through the GI generation, most of whom have now passed, gaining ground in the Silent generation, exploding among the Boomers and Generation Xers, and now normative among the Millennials, the oldest of whom are now in their mid-twenties.

This has been expressed in shorthand as a clash between science and religion, or as culture wars, or secularism versus religious faith, or as shifting social attitudes. These are convenient ways of looking at the phenomena of our times. For the institutional

church, however, it boils down to what counts as believable to most people in North American culture. Though non-belief is on the rise, the reality we are confronted with in the church is not belief in God versus atheism, but rather belief in God versus the doctrines and dogmas of particular religious institutions. The vast majority of people in this country believe in God, but they hold many contrary and conflicting notions about the nature of God.

The Christian Church has been through this before. In the Middle Ages, Christians believed the sun revolved around the earth, dragons lurked at the edges of the flat earth, angels could dance on the head of a pin, priests had magical powers, and that it was OK to burn heretics at the stake. Much of what a typical Christian believed in that era we would consider superstition today. Between the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the scientific revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the content of Christian belief changed radically as new discoveries about science forced educated people to reconsider the doctrinal claims of the Church, and reluctantly, the institutional church accommodated to the new knowledge. The shift in belief going on in our time is as profound as the shift from medieval Christianity to Reformed and Enlightenment Christianity. More on this matter of believability later.

Here are some Barna survey findings. Among non-Christians in America ages 16 to 29, only 16% have a favorable impression of Christianity. A decade ago a majority of non-Christians in this age group viewed Christianity favorably. When asked specifically about evangelical Christianity, only 3% have a good impression of this part of the Christian family. The great majority of young non-Christians view Christianity today as old-fashioned (78%), hypocritical (85%), judgmental (87%), and anti-gay (91%).

Now, it should not be news to any of us that non-Christians view us negatively. However, among young Christians who attend church, 80% believe Christianity is anti-gay, 52% say it is judgmental, and 47% see it as hypocritical. A phenomenon is developing among the young to call themselves followers of Jesus, or Christ followers, or apprentices of Christ rather than use the discredited word Christian.

A cartoon called “Bizarro” in the Arizona Republic earlier this year captured the spirit of this negative sentiment about Christianity. It shows a man standing in front of St. Peter at the pearly gates, and Peter says to him, “You were a believer, yes. But you skipped the not-being-a-jerk-about-it part.”

The Barna report noted that super-majorities of young adults (Christian and non-Christian alike) “believe that Christians show excessive contempt and unloving attitudes towards gays and lesbians.” According to Audrey Barrick’s *Christian Post* article, “Young Christians largely criticize the church, saying it has made homosexuality a ‘bigger sin’ than anything else.”

Parenthetically, an October 2006 Zogby International survey of military personnel serving in Iraq and Afghanistan found only 19% who were uncomfortable being around gays and lesbians and only 37% who supported the ban on homosexuals serving openly in the military. No age breakdown was reported for this survey, but since service members tend to be more conservative than the general population, this indicates a seismic shift in attitudes, with generational implications.

Barna Group president David Kinnaman said, “In our interviews, we kept encountering young people –both those inside the church and outside of it- who said that something was broken in the present-day expression of Christianity...but what surprised

me was not only the severity of their frustration with Christians, but also how frequently young born again Christians expressed some of the very same comments as young non-Christians.”

The percentage of Americans who identify themselves as part of the Christian tradition has decreased in succeeding generations. Among American adults age 40 and up, three-fourths associate themselves with Christianity in some form. Among the 16-29 age group, that drops to 60% who consider themselves Christian, and among that 60% are many whose views of the nature of Christ and the Church vary radically from traditionally orthodox doctrines.

The Barna report notes, “While Christianity remains the typical experience and most common faith in America, a fundamental recalibration is occurring within the spiritual allegiance of America’s upcoming generations.”

However, following Jesus and being part of the institutional church are not the same thing. The Gallup Poll reported that between 2003 and 2006, less than half of respondents (45-46%) expressed great confidence in institutional religion.

An Associated Press-MTV survey last August found that only 31% of 13 to 24 year-olds surveyed believed their religion was exclusively true and all others were wrong. Particular religions were not cited, so those who responded this way could have come from any religion, not just Christianity. But 68% of them were open to religions other than their own being true. Of these young people, 44% said religion and spirituality were very important to them, 21% said these were somewhat important, and 34% said religion and spirituality played a small or no part in their lives. I suspect that if the question putting religion and spirituality together had been separated into a question about religion and another question about spirituality, the results would have been different, with spirituality being more important to young people than religion.

Based on articles I’ve read and sermons I’ve heard in recent years, it would seem that this country is growing more secular and less religious. Yet there continues to be a strong draw toward spirituality, which many people, old and young alike, distinguish from religion. My observation is that greater epistemological changes are occurring within the religious community than within the secular world.

A Baylor University Religion Survey administered by Gallup reported that 63% of Americans who do not claim religious affiliation nevertheless believe in God or a higher power. What people believe about God, however, varies widely within and without the church.

That Baylor study also identified what researchers call the Four Gods. These are four understandings based on fundamentally differing perceptions of the nature of God. The four views of God are Authoritarian, Benevolent, Distant, and Critical.

The Authoritarian God is perceived as angry, judgmental and fully engaged with human activities. The Benevolent God is not angry or judgmental but is engaged in our lives. The Distant God is seen as completely and serenely uninvolved with mundane human life. The Critical God is similarly unengaged with our daily lives but is nevertheless judgmental.

The survey found that 31 percent of Americans believe in an Authoritarian God, with this view predominant in the South. Twenty-five percent believe in a Benevolent God, with this view holding forth in the Midwest. Twenty-three percent believe in a

Distant God, with Westerners tending toward this understanding. Sixteen percent believe in a Critical God, with Easterners more likely to hold this view.

Out here in the Wild West, the ethos is one of staying out of other folk's business. And people tend to be suspicious of institutions, even ones they belong to. So it's not surprising to learn that Westerners also tend to see God as not directly engaged in their daily lives. And given the large number of Midwestern transplants here, those who do believe God is engaged in their lives would tend toward the Benevolent God viewpoint. Thus, motivation for participation in church life here would incline to be more for fellowship and improving community life than for appeasing God's immanent wrath.

And regardless of belief in God, this part of the country has long known an unchurched way of life. So even minor trends away from church participation would be more pronounced here in the West. The region of the country with the greatest participation in church life –the South- is also the area where people are most likely to believe that God is angry, judgmental and personally involved with individual lives. This Baylor study may hold a piece of the puzzle as to why new churches seem to be more difficult to sustain here in the Southwest as compared with the South. It also provides a clue as to why so many people are completely comfortable staying away from church on any given Sunday.

Now, on to the matter of believability. The Boomer generation has been characterized by a certain disregard for traditional institutions and for spiritual experimentation. Since the 1960s, a growing segment of American society has taken issue with various doctrines and ecclesiastical claims of authority. My experience with Generation Xers and Millennials is that they are increasingly unwilling to accept the constraints of classical Christian doctrines. Repeatedly I've heard confirmation of this from ecumenical colleagues.

Although belief in God and veneration of Jesus remain important to the younger generation, some of what Christian denominations have routinely proclaimed is no longer believable to them. When doctrinal claims of the church clash with what 21<sup>st</sup> century young people know as real and perceive as possible, they're more apt to discard ancient doctrine than modern science. We've entered a world where spirituality is guided as much if not more by the discoveries of physics, astronomy, and genetics than by authoritative interpretations of the Bible. To a rising generation, claims of biblical inerrancy or even infallibility are no longer believable.

Indeed, a May 2007 Barna Tracking Study found that only 45% of adults surveyed strongly believe "the Bible is accurate in all the principles it teaches." Did you hear that? It's not surprising that a majority of people don't believe the Bible is accurate in all its particular details, but a majority of adults don't believe the Bible is accurate in the principles derived from it.

Too much of what the younger generation knows from science leads them to reject the Bible as literally true, although they still perceive it as a (but not the only) source of spiritual wisdom. Jesus' conception by the Holy Ghost and the virgin birth are not believable to an increasing number of people, in church and out. In overwhelming numbers they reject the claim that God's grace and salvation are limited only to those who confess Christ.

Many young adults who grew up in the church no longer give credence to the notion that a loving God would require the sacrificial death of Jesus as a prerequisite to

forgiving the sins of other people. They understand laying down one's life for one's friends, but they reject the doctrinal apparatus of atonement that has held sway in the church for many centuries.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is a confessional church. We are guided by a series of doctrinal documents stretching from the Apostles' Creed to the Brief Statement of Faith. To the rising generation, such creedal faithfulness is not likely to be a drawing card.

This, then, is our predicament. We dare not change our beliefs or doctrines to fit whatever unchurched folks in the larger society want. We need to acknowledge and respect our traditions. On the other hand, before us is the very real prospect that as a denomination, we may wither away in a generation or two, tied down by theological claims that are in essence no longer believable to a majority of the people. Maybe in that context the best that we can do is to allow ourselves to die with as much grace as possible.

There is a tendency among otherwise mature Christians to want the joys of resurrection without the grief of death. If we truly want to resurrect our denomination from the ignominious decline we are experiencing, maybe we need to embrace decline rather than fight it. In the next two or three decades, a significant number among us will depart for the celestial realms. And others among us will drop out of church because, like the younger generations, they experience the church as judgmental, burdened with no longer believable doctrines, or as simply irrelevant. As fewer and fewer from the younger generations come into our declining fellowship, maybe an intentional transition to congregational hospice care would be a suitable approach for us. Or perhaps evolving into a small pure sect of orthodox believers would be a more productive direction.

On the other hand, although we ought not to change based solely on what people outside the church think, we inside the church have in the past, as Jack Rogers has reminded us, changed our minds about theology, interpretation of scripture, ordination standards, and social conventions. We have also embraced and integrated into our faith the discoveries of science that conflict with biblical narratives and pre-Enlightenment theology.

Maybe we will decide to do that again with regard to those parts of our creeds and confessions that have become stumbling blocks to faith in this century. Maybe we will endeavor to be more flexible about doctrine and create worshiping communities where we can welcome metaphorical Christians and spiritual seekers, even if we are a bit uncomfortable with them.

Yet even if we change and reform to fit the epistemological realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a good chance the Millennials and the generations that follow them will still not join our churches. Perched here on the edge of a dramatically shifting American culture, one option for us as denomination, presbytery, and congregations would be to change nothing, in which case our slow decline is bound to continue. This might not be so bad for a couple of decades and could be managed with a certain amount of dignity. Our churches could be refuges for those who are uncomfortable or unable to cope with the extreme rapidity of social and intellectual change in an Internet connected world.

But if we choose to act, we can seek reform in either of two directions. If we pursue reformation by tightening our hold on traditional orthodox confessions, the

membership decline will accelerate, but we will more quickly reach the stable status of doctrinally cohesive sect.

The other option would be to loosen up theologically and open our doors to followers of Jesus for whom historically orthodox confessions are problematic. In fact, we've been doing this tentatively for four or five decades, but we've kept ourselves far from the leading edge of this movement.

Committing to an approach of radical openness would be the more difficult and riskier course, but also, I think, the only path offering a chance for survival as a nationally significant denomination. Traveling this route, however, would require that we first resolve in a progressive direction the tension surrounding the full inclusion of sexual minorities in church life.

Friends, in very rough terms I envision three radically different futures for us. We can become a much smaller but theologically homogeneous conservative church with essentially congregational structure. Or we can become a much more theologically diverse and more socially inclusive denomination, also probably smaller than today but with a national connectional structure in place. Or, we can hunker down and care for our faithful remnant until we close the last remaining congregation and sell off all our sanctuaries to become theme restaurants and New Age temples.

Then again, maybe God has something else in mind for us that none of us has yet conceived. In my experience, God has shown a marked inclination toward surprising us with new things. Thus, I find it completely believable that God will show this presbytery a way into the future. With all these survey figures and demographics swirling around in your minds, the presbytery's Planning Committee would like you to gather now in small groups to discuss what God is calling us to be and do as the Presbytery of Grand Canyon.

Thanks for listening.