

CHURCH: How Now Do We Church?

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How is your church doing? Are there any—many?—in your area that are for sale, having shrunk out of existence and are now likely to become another new restaurant or apartment building? God's church has faced the resistance of the world since its birth. Today the challenges are as varied as they are deep and seemingly insurmountable. But believers know we serve a faithful and powerful Father in heaven who generously pours out His wisdom and grace as soon as we ask. As we're now a full 25% of the way into the 21st century, here are eight of the powerful patterns our churches are facing, and what we can do to carry faithfully the message of Jesus to our neighbor across the street and the far corners of the world.

1) Declining Religious Affiliations. Studies from the Barna Group and Pew Research reveal a troubling decline in religious affiliation, particularly among millennials and Gen Z. Churches face significant challenges in retaining younger members who often struggle with doubts, disillusionment and disengagement.

To address this, churches are investing in innovative re-engagement strategies. Apologetics ministries address intellectual and spiritual doubts, while outreach efforts include hosting community events and partnering with schools or civic organizations. Creative approaches are essential to reignite interest and commitment among younger generations who value authentic relationships and mentorship. Programs that pair younger members with mature believers spark discipleship and accountability. Additionally, incorporating contemporary

worship styles, social media and addressing relevant cultural topics bridge generational differences. Ultimately, a combination of relational and programmatic efforts is necessary to counteract declining affiliation.

2) Mental Wellness and Wholeness. Mental wellness is a critical area of focus within the evangelical church that has been hiding in plain view for several years but has become more visible and important in the recent past, not least due to the ongoing effects of the pandemic. Recognizing the prevalence of anxiety, depression and trauma, and their many origins in contrast to their relatively few solutions, many churches have launched counseling ministries, support groups and partnerships with licensed therapists. Sermons now frequently address mental health topics, integrating biblical wisdom with psychological insights. Additionally, there is growing awareness of pastoral burnout, prompting initiatives to care for leaders' mental well-being. By prioritizing mental health, churches not only support individual wholeness but also strengthen their overall communities.

Addressing mental health also involves fostering environments where vulnerability is welcomed and stigmas are dismantled. Small groups, peer support networks and pastoral training on mental health awareness can create safe spaces for congregants to seek help. Furthermore, partnerships with mental health professionals can ensure that churches offer informed and effective care, bridging the gap between spiritual and clinical support.

3) Resurgence in Charismatic and Pentecostal Expressions. Pentecostal and charismatic expressions of faith are experiencing a notable resurgence. Interest has been rising in spiritual gifts such as prophecy, healing, deliverance and a strong presence and valuing of operating in the prophetic. This is seen particularly among the younger age groups seeking deeper connections with God's will and purpose for their lives through their faith. The Pentecostal and charismatic segments

are some of the fastest-growing areas in the global body of Christ, offering vibrant Spirit-filled worship that resonates with contemporary seekers. But beyond mere “vibrant” worship, the Pentecostal and charismatic churches frequently are places where believers go far deeper in the Lord than many more traditional worship traditions through the baptism in the Holy Spirit. It remains true today as it has been the past few decades that many mainline denominations gravitate toward Pentecostal-type living of faith and being transformed from the inside out by God’s power given in the blood of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

The resurgence shows the timeless and universal appeal of worship that engages both believers and seekers through music, prayer and expressions that create a profound sense of connection to God and others. However, this trend also raises theological and practical questions about discernment, accountability and the balance between emotional experiences and Scriptural grounding which are fertile territory for pastors and ministry leaders to press in and guide their congregations and communities.

4) Cultural Polarization, Political Realignment. Cultural polarization presents a formidable challenge for evangelical churches. Internal divisions often arise over contentious issues such as LGBTQ inclusion, abortion and political alignment. Congregational splits have become more common as members grapple with differing views on these critical matters. Many leaders call for a return to a nonpartisan, gospel-centered approach. Younger evangelical leaders are especially vocal about distancing the church from partisan identities while retaining a prophetic voice in public discourse. This realignment demands careful navigation to foster unity while maintaining theological integrity.

Global interconnectedness of cultural and political trends amplifies these challenges, driving churches to engage with issues of racial justice, economic inequality and

environmental stewardship, recognizing that younger generations often expect faith communities to address such concerns. The church's ability to remain not merely relevant but a driving force in the culture for the cause of Christ depends on its capacity to engage these conversations thoughtfully and compassionately.

5) Theological Shifts and *Deconstruction*. Theological deconstruction is a recent trend affecting the church. In short, many believers across different age groups are reevaluating traditional doctrines and practices. This process often involves questioning long-held beliefs and exploring progressive theologies.

Churches have responded in varied ways. Some embrace the opportunity for honest dialogue and growth, while others resist what they perceive as threats to orthodoxy. Shifts in views on gender roles, LGBTQ inclusion and various political topics are particularly contentious but also reflect broader cultural dynamics influencing the church.

The rise of this deconstruction phase also shows the value of creating space for further intellectual and spiritual discovery. Churches that pursue open discussions without fear of judgment can fortify both trust and engagement. At the same time, leaders can articulate and model robust and compelling vision of faith that can balance scrutiny and cultural shifts without compromising Scriptural convictions.

6) Living Missionally. The evangelical church is experiencing a renewed emphasis on mission, both locally and globally. Everyday mission encourages believers to integrate their faith into daily life, impacting workplaces, neighborhoods and social circles. Community outreach remains a cornerstone of missional efforts, with programs addressing tangible needs such as food insecurity, education and addiction recovery. On a global scale, churches are adopting holistic mission strategies that encompass spiritual, social, and material

dimensions, embodying the comprehensive nature of the gospel.

Missional engagement also involves listening and learning from those being served, "Are we being the hands and feet of Jesus?" Effective missions prioritize partnership and empowerment by working collaboratively with communities enabling churches to address issues while reflecting Christ's love. Additionally, training members to see their vocations and daily interactions as platforms for mission broadens the church's impact beyond organized programs.

7) Ongoing Digital Revolution. The digital revolution is a few decades old now since the earliest days of the internet and social media, and it continues to reshape how churches operate, engage and minister. Post-pandemic, many congregations have embraced hybrid models, blending in-person and virtual experiences to maintain both local and global outreach. High-quality livestreams and robust online platforms have become essential for maintaining connectivity with congregants. Many churches have pioneered digital discipleship to reach millions worldwide. On-demand sermon libraries and custom apps enable churches to extend their reach far beyond physical walls.

Challenges remain, however, and retaining meaningful engagement in online formats while building genuine community and combating "screen fatigue" are persistent obstacles. Churches must innovate continually to balance digital accessibility with authentic relationships.

In addition, the rise of AI is both a strong opportunity as well as a stark potential risk factor. While AI-driven tools can help churches personalize discipleship, analyze engagement trends and even create content, there remain a wide unknown area of ethical considerations about privacy and reliance on technology. For many, digital platforms are a supplement rather than a substitute for in-person fellowship, making it crucial to strike the right balance.

8) Decentralization & Church Planting. The shift toward decentralized church models combines the idea toward micro-churches and smaller gatherings that prioritize discipleship and close-knit community with solutions for churches to be more flexible and locally relevant. Church planting plays a valuable role in sowing new congregations by providing resources, training and support for emerging leaders. At the same time, megachurches are increasingly spinning off multisite campuses into independent entities to adapt and maintain relevance in diverse and rapidly changing cultural landscapes in more local community settings.

Decentralization also reflects a broader cultural shift toward grassroots and community-driven initiatives. Smaller church models often foster deeper relationships and more active participation among members. However, this approach requires robust leadership development pipelines to ensure sustainability. Additionally, decentralized churches face challenges in maintaining doctrinal unity and consistent vision across diverse groups.

The Days Ahead

While challenges abound, they also present opportunities for innovation, growth and effectively carrying out the Great Commission with the light of Jesus in every dark corner of our shrinking world. Engaging these trends with wisdom and courage prepares our churches to fulfill their holy purposes in a rapidly changing world.

The way forward requires humility, adaptability and an ever-deeper pressing in to the cause of Christ. As we navigate these trends, the church not only can survive but thrive serving as a beacon of hope, love and transformation for generations to come.

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