

Mainline Churches May Be 'On Precipice of Decline'

✖ Mainline Protestant churches might be “on the precipice of a period of decline,” says research guru George Barna after his research firm’s latest report on the state of mainline denominations.

Although The Barna Group study recognized a recent 10-year stability in the six major denominations-American Baptist Churches in the USA; the Episcopal Church; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; the Presbyterian Church (USA); the United Church of Christ; and the United Methodist Church-overall membership is a small fragment of what it was 60 years ago, when the denominations dominated the country’s Protestant landscape.

Today only 15 percent of American adults attend a mainline church, which on the average consists of almost 100 people. Although those numbers remained consistent during the last decade, Barna found indications of an imminent decline based on such factors as a sharp decrease in adults with children under the age of 18. In addition, almost 40 percent of mainline church attendees are single.

With the rise of evangelical and Pentecostal churches since the 1950s, mainline churches have struggled to attract younger adults and minorities-particularly Hispanics, who make up more than 16 percent of the U.S. population but only 6 percent of the mainline church.

In addition, volunteerism is down (21 percent since 1998), as is adult Sunday school participation (17 percent since 1998). On the flip side, the average age of the mainline pastor is getting older (48 in 1998, 55 today), while these pastors only remain with a congregation an average of four years, compared to twice that length for non-mainline church leaders.