

Six Megathemes Emerge from Barna Group Research in 2010

Change usually happens slowly in the Church. But a review of the past year's research conducted by the Barna Group provides a time-lapse portrayal of how the religious environment in the U.S. is morphing into something new.

Analyzing insights drawn from more than 5,000 non-proprietary interviews conducted over the past 11 months, George Barna indicated that the following patterns were evident in the survey findings.

1. The Christian Church is becoming less theologically literate.

What used to be basic, universally-known truths about Christianity are now unknown mysteries to a large and growing share of Americans—especially young adults. For instance, Barna Group studies in 2010 showed that while most people regard Easter as a religious holiday, only a minority of adults associate Easter with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Other examples include the finding that few adults believe that their faith is meant to be the focal point of their life or to be integrated into every aspect of their existence. Further, a growing majority believe the Holy Spirit is a symbol of God's presence or power, but not a living entity. As the two younger generations (Busters and Mosaics) ascend to numerical and positional supremacy in churches across the nation, the data suggest that biblical literacy is likely to decline significantly. The theological free-for-all that is encroaching in Protestant churches nationwide suggests the coming decade will be a time of unparalleled theological diversity and inconsistency.

2. Christians are becoming more ingrown and less outreach-oriented.

Despite technological advances that make communications instant and far-reaching, Christians are becoming more spiritually isolated from non-Christians than was true a decade ago. Examples of this tendency include the fact that less than one-third of born again Christians planned to invite anyone to join them at a church event during the Easter season; teenagers are less inclined to discuss Christianity with their friends than was true in the past; most of the people who become Christians these days do so in response to a personal crisis or the fear of death (particularly among older Americans); and most Americans are unimpressed with the contributions Christians and churches have made to society over the past few years. As young adults have children, the prospect of them seeking a Christian church is diminishing—especially given the absence of faith talk in their conversations with the people they most trust. With atheists becoming more strategic in championing their godless worldview, as well as the increased religious plurality driven by education and immigration, the increasing reticence of Christians to engage in faith-oriented conversations assumes heightened significance.

3. Growing numbers of people are less interested in spiritual principles and more desirous of learning pragmatic solutions for life.

When asked what matters most, teenagers prioritize education, career development, friendships, and travel. Faith is significant to them, but it takes a back seat to life accomplishments and is not necessarily perceived to affect their ability to achieve their dreams. Among adults the areas of growing importance are lifestyle comfort, success, and personal achievements. Those dimensions have risen at the expense of investment in both faith and family. The turbo-charged pace of society leaves people with little time for reflection. The deeper thinking that occurs typically relates to economic concerns or relational pressures. Spiritual practices like contemplation, solitude, silence, and

simplicity are rare. (It is ironic that more than four out of five adults claim to live a simple life.) Practical to a fault, Americans consider survival in the present to be much more significant than eternal security and spiritual possibilities. Because we continue to separate our spirituality from other dimensions of life through compartmentalization, a relatively superficial approach to faith has become a central means of optimizing our life experience.

4. Among Christians, interest in participating in community action is escalating.

Largely driven by the passion and energy of young adults, Christians are more open to and more involved in community service activities than has been true in the recent past. While we remain more self-indulgent than self-sacrificing, the expanded focus on justice and service has struck a chord with many. However, despite the increased emphasis, churches run the risk of watching congregants' engagement wane unless they embrace a strong spiritual basis for such service. Simply doing good works because it's the socially esteemed choice of the moment will not produce much staying power.

To facilitate service as a long-term way of living and to provide people with the intrinsic joy of blessing others, churches have a window of opportunity to support such action with biblical perspective. And the more that churches and believers can be recognized as people doing good deeds out of genuine love and compassion, the more appealing the Christian life will be to those who are on the sidelines watching. Showing that community action as a viable alternative to government programs is another means of introducing the value of the Christian faith in society.

5. The postmodern insistence on tolerance is winning over the Christian Church.

Our biblical illiteracy and lack of spiritual confidence has caused Americans to avoid making discerning choices for fear

of being labeled judgmental. The result is a Church that has become tolerant of a vast array of morally and spiritually dubious behaviors and philosophies. This increased leniency is made possible by the very limited accountability that occurs within the body of Christ. There are fewer and fewer issues that Christians believe churches should be dogmatic about. The idea of love has been redefined to mean the absence of conflict and confrontation, as if there are no moral absolutes that are worth fighting for. That may not be surprising in a Church in which a minority believes there are moral absolutes dictated by the scriptures.

The challenge today is for Christian leaders to achieve the delicate balance between representing truth and acting in love. The challenge for every Christian in the U.S. is to know his/her faith well enough to understand which fights are worth fighting, and which stands are non-negotiable. There is a place for tolerance in Christianity; knowing when and where to draw the line appears to perplex a growing proportion of Christians in this age of tolerance.

6. The influence of Christianity on culture and individual lives is largely invisible.

Christianity has arguably added more value to American culture than any other religion, philosophy, ideology or community. Yet, contemporary Americans are hard pressed to identify any specific value added. Partly due to the nature of today's media, they have no problem identifying the faults of the churches and Christian people.

In a period of history where image is reality, and life-changing decisions are made on the basis of such images, the Christian Church is in desperate need of a more positive and accessible image. The primary obstacle is not the substance of the principles on which Christianity is based, and therefore the solution is not solely providing an increase in preaching or public relations. The most influential aspect of Christianity in America is how believers do—or do

not-implement their faith in public and private. American culture is driven by the snap judgments and decisions that people make amidst busy schedules and incomplete information. With little time or energy available for or devoted to research and reflection, it is people's observations of the integration of a believer's faith into how he/she responds to life's opportunities and challenges that most substantially shape people's impressions of and interest in Christianity. Jesus frequently spoke about the importance of the fruit that emerges from a Christian life; these days the pace of life and avalanche of competing ideas underscores the significance of visible spiritual fruit as a source of cultural influence.

With the likelihood of an accelerating pace of life and increasingly incomplete cues being given to the population, Christian leaders would do well to revisit their criteria for "success" and the measures used to assess it. In a society in which choice is king, there are no absolutes, every individual is a free agent, we are taught to be self-reliant and independent, and Christianity is no longer the automatic, default faith of young adults, new ways of relating to Americans and exposing the heart and soul of the Christian faith are required. Although there were a few subgroups that were more likely than average to experience church-based accountability, there was not a single segment for which even one out of every five people said their church does anything to hold them accountable. The segments that were most likely to have some form of church-centered accountability were evangelicals (15%), adults living in the western states (10%), people who say they are conservative on social and political matters (9%), and Baby Busters, who are known to be a highly relational generation (8%). Amazingly, while 7% of Protestants claimed to have such accountability there was not a single Catholic adult surveyed who claimed to be held accountable by his/her church.

What megathemes do you expect to see in 2011? What are your

predictions? Let me know in the comment box below.