

Don't Believe the Lie That Christianity Is Declining

I'm sure you've never heard of Mary Larios. For years she ran a small cantina near Rio Hondo, Guatemala. But after her conversion to Jesus Christ, she went back to the community of Sunsapote, 20 miles from her house, to share her faith with relatives.

Today, about 40 people attend the Bible studies that Mary organized. With the help of her pastor in Rio Hondo, Otoniel Morales, she is buying land to build the first Protestant church in Sunsapote. When I came to visit the town last week, the new converts and some curious spectators joined us for an impromptu worship service under a tree.

There was nothing impressive about this moment, at least by the world's standards. Most of the people there were single mothers with children. All of them live below poverty level. As I poured some oil on a rock to dedicate the land for the new congregation, I wept as I realized how God cares about the people and places we typically ignore.

And I rejoiced that I could see with my own eyes how the gospel is spreading—slow and steady—in a time when skeptics claim that Christianity is fading.

It's fashionable in America today to bash Christians. The mainstream media insists that faith is irrelevant and that churches will soon go the way of eight-track tape players. But the facts say otherwise. Christian faith is growing, especially in the developing world.

I've visited Guatemala more than 10 times, and it's obvious faith is on the rise there. In 1991, about 19 percent of the population attended evangelical churches. Today that number has grown to as much as 30 percent. Almost every time I've

visited, I've been a part of a dedication service for a new church. This same growth is happening in many parts of the world:

- Over the past 100 years in Africa, Christianity has grown from 10 percent of the population to 25 percent.
- Asia's Christian population is expected to grow from 350 million to 460 million by the year 2025, based on current growth rates. It is estimated that more people in China attend church on any given Sunday than in the United States.
- Iran is experiencing an unusual visitation of the Holy Spirit today. One ministry reports that it receives more than 700 requests for information about Jesus from Iranians every day. In spite of intense persecution and the arrest of pastors, an underground house church movement is sweeping the Muslim country.
- In Algeria, which has been staunchly Muslim for centuries, a similar house church movement is growing. After the government recently closed 11 churches, an Algerian pastor told reporters: "The more problems the church faces, the stronger it grows."

We often hear dire warnings that Christianity in America is in decline. But a recent study throws that theory into question. While noting that many mainline churches are closing their doors, the report by Harvard University and Indiana University says the number of Americans who attend church more than once a week, pray daily and read the Bible regularly are actually steady.

The same study found that evangelicals grew from 1972—when they were 18 percent of the population—to about 28 percent from the late 1980s to 2016. Over the same time, mainline churches declined from 35 to 12 percent. Religion in America, the Harvard study says, enjoys "persistent and exceptional intensity."

Glenn Stanton is the author of an important new book, *The Myth of the Dying Church* (Hachette). He is full of hope that Christian faith, regardless of how it is persecuted by dictators, maligned by the media or misrepresented by churchgoers themselves, is still moving forward. Says Stanton: "The bottom line is this: faithful Christianity—that which takes the Bible at its word, believes Jesus really is God, that He died on a real cross, rose from a real grave and offers real freedom from real sin to all who ask—is doing quite well."

When I was in Guatemala last week, I went back and read what Jesus said about the growth of His church. He compared His kingdom to a tiny mustard seed. Although it is "smaller than all other seeds," Jesus said, "when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches" (Matt. 13:32, NASB).

What we do for the Lord will not impress the world. Our steps are small, our progress seems slow and our seeds are tiny. But you can take courage. In the end, those who mock God will be surprised when they see the size and the impact of the final global harvest.