

Good News for Charismatics

A widely publicized study released in late April about why Americans have given up their faith or changed religions is actually good news for charismatic churches. The survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, described as the largest study of its type about why people change their religious affiliation, interviewed 2,800 people. It found that respondents had not become more secular or rejected their religious affiliation because of anger over doctrinal or leadership issues but because they had “just gradually drifted away from their faith.”

Why is that good news? Because it’s an indication that people want something that will meet their needs.

Thirty-five years ago my late mentor, Jamie Buckingham, newly baptized in the Holy Spirit, put this provocative comment on his church’s marquee: “For More than a Sunday Morning Religion.” He knew that people aren’t interested in just hearing a dull sermon and singing the same songs that have been sung for decades. They want a vibrant faith—the living Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is why Pentecostal and charismatic churches around the world are growing.

Like many of the churches noted in the survey, charismatic churches have the problem of people coming in the front door and going out the back door. But I believe the survey results are good news for those of us in the charismatic movement. Here’s why:

People want an exciting worship experience. They don’t want “boring religion.” One thing people say about charismatic churches is that the services are anything but boring.

They want a genuine encounter with God. Often that comes

through praise and worship—the subject of this month’s cover story. In fact, the charismatic church has led the way in this area through musicians such as Israel Houghton, Darlene Zschech and others we include in the article.

People want answers to their personal problems. Charismatics pioneered the concept of inner healing, pray for deliverance from life-altering addictions and lay hands on the sick, trusting they will recover, for “by His stripes we are healed” (Is. 53:5, NKJV). We believe God has answers for our personal problems, and that resonates with people who are searching.

If people want community, they can find it at Spirit-filled churches, which are more ethnically and generationally diverse than other segments of the body of Christ. Are they perfect? Of course not. But when you find a mixed-race church, it’s usually charismatic.

Our churches tend to be independent, if not organizationally, at least in attitude. Independence can sometimes create a lone-ranger mentality. But it also frees up leaders who have a passion and a vision to get outside the box and share the gospel with those who are hurting.

It has also spawned new churches and ministries, including Christian TV, which reaches millions who don’t go to church. Many who watch Christian programming later get active in a church, but even those who don’t are hearing the gospel and being touched.

Sharing the gospel and reaching out to poor and hurting people are values almost universally shared by Pentecostal and charismatic churches. There’s a need for us to do more. But charismatics have grown around the world because they emphasize outreach, both here and overseas.

As a movement we certainly aren’t perfect. Sadly, many of our churches are just as dead and boring as the ones spoken about in the Pew report. Timothy warns against “having a form of

godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5). And there is nothing “deader” than a dead Pentecostal or charismatic church.

However, we don’t approve of deadness, and charismatics won’t put up with it for long. They vote with their feet by going where the presence of God brings life.

I’ve been covering the charismatic church for three decades, and I believe we’re continuing to grow at a time when many other churches aren’t. But the Pew report should remind us that people want answers and we have them—all from the Word of God.

To me, that’s good news.

Steve Strang *is founder and publisher of Charisma. Read his weekly Strang Report via email or his Twitter updates here.*