

# Is the American Church on a Respirator or Catching Its Breath?

Over the last 40 years, we have witnessed a slow decline within the church in the United States.

This year is no exception. In 2021 we are witnessing one of the most significant cultural shifts in American church history

The big question is this: Is the church on a respirator or just catching its breath?

## **The “Christian” Label**

The label “Christian” is in decline from the once Christian and family-centrist cultural values. While some hold to Christian values, people of faith engage and attend church less now than any other time in America.

About one-third of Americans now say they worship weekly, and two-thirds say they rarely or never attend a service.

As recently as 30 years ago, 67% of Americans attended and supported a local church. The most recent (2013) poll by the Pew Research Center reported that just 37% of Americans attended church weekly (Gallup’s estimate came in at 39% in 2013).

The church in America once shaped our society and strongly influenced our neighborhoods. In the ’70s, the churches began their building projects in high traffic areas – away from neighborhoods. This decision had both positive and negative repercussions.

Yes, we reached more people, but churches also abandoned the

neighborhoods they once strongly influenced. This shifted the church from operating as a family to acting like a supermarket.

Four decades ago, the church was like a family.

Today's church is far different.

I recently saw an advertisement for a Sunday morning service; the last line read, "and free doughnuts." Really?

Would you come to church for a free doughnut?

So, this is where we have arrived, free doughnuts at church. Enticing? Not really.

### **The Church as a Family**

I remember the days when going to church was expected. Everyone in our community attended church. It takes a church to raise a healthy community.

Do you remember when we prayed together at church? Do you remember doing life together? We attended the games of the neighbor's kids. Do you remember buying girl scout cookies from friends in the neighborhood? Most of that has changed.

As the church goes, the culture goes. With the American church in decline, so are our values.

The church is in decline, and simultaneously the moral climate of our culture is tanking.

"If there's one trend to watch moving forward, it's that America likely accelerated its journey into becoming a post-modern, post-Christian culture. The future church will have to stand as an alternative to the culture, not echo it," church consultant Carey Nieuwhof said.

Is there a correlation between our moral compass and a declining church?

Most Americans once believed in the Ten Commandments, but like Moses, we threw them aside. Our culture now honors feelings over truth. We have substituted our emotions for biblical choices.

Premarital sex is OK if you plan on getting married. The feeling of love is ranked higher in acceptance than the sin of premarital sex. Have we lost the ability to choose God over our preferences?

### **We Shifted From a Family-Style Church to Attenders**

In the 2000s, the church became something to attend. It also became a choice. We once considered attending church as something we needed. No longer.

Church is now an option.

The struggle with making church an option is that it becomes the last option. Would kids rather go to the beach or a picnic than go to church? Yes, for sure.

And going to the beach is fantastic, and so is family fun. But is the regular choice of family fun the best option for the family? I don't think it is.

There are six other days and seven evenings for family fun. Families can have all the fun they want after attending church together.

Attenders only attend. The shift from connecting as a member to becoming just an attender changes the entire mindset of a person.

- Members show up early.
- Members serve the family.
- Members give love and care.
- Members are involved.

Unlike attenders:

- Attenders attend.
- Attenders come late and leave early.
- Attenders rarely serve.
- Attenders tip God.
- Attenders rarely serve others.
- Attenders enhance our numbers but rarely benefit the organization.
- Attenders eventually become consumers.

### **We Shifted From Attenders to Consumers**

The next shift was to consumers. Attenders began to shop for the church with the best benefits, like shopping for the best restaurant.

We once chose our church based by where we were called to serve and help. Many believers now choose a church with the best worship and the best facilities. After finding the best worship leaders in town, we brag on our church like bragging about finding a pair of expensive jeans at a low price.

Thomas Rainer said it best: “Many of our congregations have become more like country clubs than churches, a place where some members demand their way instead of serving and self-sacrificing.”

All of this as we watch our communities slide into spiritual decline.

So, where are we now?

Lifeway Research survey shows that in January 2021:

- 31% of churches are still reporting less than 50% of their

January 2020 attendance.

- 37% are hovering between 50%-70%, and 30% are between 70%-100%.
- Only 2% report seeing more than 100% of their attendance a year ago.

Yes, the pandemic accelerated the decline. The church experts are saying, “We are in a pivot.” And yes, they are right. And the pivot is a big one.

Can the church recover? Absolutely yes.

The 50-year learning curve is here. Some of the church changes were needed, and other changes should never have happened.

### **The Shift to Authenticity**

The big pivot is shifting back to simple. Our former services focused on lights and haze with dramatic impact. That’s all coming down. The cool church is no longer vital.

Being relevant is more than sexy lights and haze machines

Nieuwhof says, “Cool won’t cut it, hype won’t cut it, and fun won’t cut it. Authentic is the new attraction.”

The return to connection and family is paramount and at the forefront of the coming pivot for churches. Excellent services and a new sermon series are no longer a big draw. The big draw for 2021 and beyond is connection.

People are isolated, facing anxiety and looking for meaningful relationships. The local church leaders must pivot to connecting people into groups, finding friends and building strong relationships that facilitate spiritual growth.

In some cases, church in the coming decade will flesh out as smaller churches and more focus on building people rather than building buildings.

“Nobody should be able to out-community the local church,” Nieuwhof says.

I agree.

Let’s get back to reaching people and influencing our neighborhoods. {eo}

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