

Why Churches Are Doing Well in a Down Economy

In spite of layoffs, foreclosures and economic uncertainty, many churches in America are thriving. We tracked this trend at 12 growing churches around the nation.

Famous for his ripped image on billboards throughout Sin City, a male review singer quit his job after being “dramatically saved” and now sings at the International Church of Las Vegas. In this desert fleshpot, hundreds of laid-off casino and construction workers seeking spiritual solace in tough times have joined the church too. And throughout cyberspace, 4,600 people log onto each week to hear pastor Paul Goulet’s sermons.

Since the global economic crisis began—hitting this tourist-dependent gambling mecca especially hard—weekly attendance at the church has exploded from 4,500 to 6,000, Goulet says. That’s a 33 percent increase.

“There is definitely an awakening occurring,” he adds. “And it’s not just reserved for Las Vegas and other cities in the United States. It’s really worldwide now.”

Contrary to *Newsweek*’s claim about the decline and fall of Christian America, evangelical churches around the globe are thriving. Pastors at charismatic, Pentecostal and other evangelical churches say that as people are suffering the effects of the financial downturn, houses of worship are experiencing dramatic rises in attendance. Although many evangelical churches have experienced steady growth in the last decade, pastors say they haven’t seen this kind of upsurge since hippies disenchanted with the 1960s and 1970s counterculture discovered the original revolutionary—Jesus Christ.

“Back in the Jesus Movement, there was a tremendous spiritual awakening that occurred across America,” says J. Don George, 72-year-old pastor of the Assemblies of God-affiliated Calvary Church in Irving, Texas, where average weekly attendance has increased 32 percent since the recession began. “What I’m seeing now is very similar to that—the enthusiasm, the attitude of, ‘I can’t wait until next Sunday to see what God is going to do. I want to get back in church with my family. I want more of God in my life.’ Indeed, there appears to be a spiritual awakening occurring.”

And unlike the short-lived increase in church attendance after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, pastors say this “spiritual tidal wave” is ongoing.

“I think this is the most exciting opportunity for the Christian church in America,” says the Rev. A.R. Bernard, senior pastor of the nondenominational, charismatic Christian Cultural Center in Brooklyn, N.Y. “People are hungry. People are fearful. People want answers. They want security. They want comfort. And what better entity than the church to provide that?”

Many churches are using overflow areas, hosting presentations to help people with their finances and offering sermons on the economy, current events and Bible prophecy. With world leaders calling for a global currency and economic system, Bernard says he is seeing a resurgence of interest in biblical prophecies regarding the second coming.

A recent survey by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life found that 79 percent of American Christians believe in the second coming and 34 percent believe the world situation will worsen before Jesus’ return.

Some pastors are telling their congregations that current events—calls for a global government, the growing alliance between Iran and Russia, Iran’s threats to annihilate Israel

and rising anti-Semitism—are “warning signs” that Jesus could come much sooner than people think. “I’ve said since the start of the year that I believe we’re living in the last days and the end times,” says Jim Tolle, senior pastor of The Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California. “It’s on a lot of people’s minds.”

Glenn Kirby, pastor of West Valley Christian Church in West Hills, Calif., where the congregation has swelled 27 percent since the recession began, says he’s never seen a greater opportunity to reach people in his 42 years of ministry.

“The reason people are turning to God is because it feels like the end of the world,” Kirby says. “We have a global economy forming and other major changes the Bible talks about. These things jog our memory about what the Bible says will happen and make us think we better get ready just in case this is a preview of the end of the world.”

The recent upswing in attendance at evangelical churches comes on the heels of a 2008 survey by Trinity College, which found that although mainline churches experienced steep declines from 1990 to 2008, nondenominational, charismatic and Pentecostal churches grew steadily, especially after 2001. The American Religious Identification Survey found that in that time, attendance at mainline churches dropped from 32.8 million to 29.4 million. Meanwhile, attendance at nondenominational Christian churches grew from 26 million to 32.4 million, and attendance at Pentecostal and charismatic churches increased from 5.6 million to 7.9 million.

“Churches teaching the Bible are exploding,” says Jack Hibbs, pastor at Calvary Chapel Chino Hills in Southern California. “Some of our fellow Calvary Chapels have seen their attendance double from just six to eight months ago.”

In another study, “Praying for Recession,” David Beckworth, an assistant professor of economics at Texas State University,

found that the rate of growth in evangelical churches had surged 50 percent in each recession between 1968 and 2004.

“This is going to be the glory days for evangelical churches,” Beckworth says. “This recession could last well into [2013] or later, and this is going to be a boon time for evangelical churches.”

Gateway Church

At Gateway Church in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, pastor Robert Morris says he’s seen a “newfound spiritual hunger” in recent months.

“Jesus said you can’t serve God and mammon, and mammon means the god of riches,” Morris says. “I think a lot of people in our country have misplaced their faith in money and so now all of a sudden they realize how fleeting it is. I think there is a real hunger for God, for the church and for the real thing.”

Since the recession started, the church’s weekend attendance has increased 42 percent, from 8,500 to 12,100—a jump Morris attributes to a focus on preaching the Word of God. “If you take the Bible out of church, the church is going to decline,” Morris says. “People used to go to church out of a sense of duty, and that’s not holding them anymore.”

Last year, the church had 2,300 first-time decisions for Christ, and most of those people had never been to church before, says Executive Senior Pastor Tom Lane. Many of these people experienced a “catalyst” in their lives—the loss of a job or vehicle repossession, Lane says.

To help people learn how to be good stewards of their finances, the church offers financial seminars and career counseling.

Calvary Church

On Easter Sunday, 5,048 people attended the Assemblies of God-affiliated Calvary Church in Irving, Texas, setting the highest attendance record in the church's history. Since the recession began, average weekly attendance at the church has increased 32 percent, says pastor J. Don George.

George, who has overseen this congregation for the last 37 years that started with 50 people, says the momentum has intensified since late last year. Churchgoers are bringing people who have never been to church before.

"For some reason, people have had greater success in bringing business colleagues, neighbors and friends to church with them," George says. "We are getting testimonials, e-mails and letters every week from people who are saying they've never been to church before and, 'My life was changed.' "

George believes several factors are responsible for the upswing—the recession, a more consistent prayer life in the church, the Holy Spirit and his delivering more culturally relevant messages. As the demographics of the area have changed in recent years, the church has gone from 98 percent white to a third white, a third African-American, and a third Latino and Asian, George says.

"It now mirrors the face of our community, the face of our nation and the face of our world," George says. "We think it's what heaven is going to look like—multi-colors and multi-races."

International Church of Las Vegas Calvary Church

In a city known for drinking, gambling and temptations of the flesh, International Church of Las Vegas pastor Paul Goulet says he's seen a "serious spiritual hunger" in people,

especially among those whose jobs depend on the fortunes of the hotel-casinos. As tourism has dropped precipitously, the hotel-casinos have laid off many workers, sending reverberations throughout the economy. Workers in industries dependent on gaming—such as construction and real estate—have lost their jobs too.

“I live in Las Vegas, and when things get tough, people turn to God,” Goulet says. “They are hungry. They are hurting. They are confused. They feel ripped off and want to know whether anybody has any answers.”

In an effort to help, Goulet invested heavily in Internet outreach several years ago. He also invited Lou Engle’s TheCall to lead the church in prayer, worship and fasting, and regularly offers monthly giveaways of food and other household staples. The church has reached out to its diverse community as well, drawing 682 people to its first Latino service.

“There is a massive battle being waged for our city, and we are fighting through a lot of increased prayer,” Goulet says.

North Point Community Church

Bob Strickland, the executive director of multi-site ministries for North Point Community Church in Atlanta—pastored by Andy Stanley—says he’s seen a “marked increase” in attendance since September. In that time, attendance at North Point Ministries’ three campuses has grown more than 16 percent, from 18,000 to 21,000. Although some of the growth may be attributed to the church’s cyclical pattern, Strickland says more people are turning to God in these difficult times.

“When times get harder, people return to church or they look to the church for some of their answers,” Strickland says. And as they lose jobs and money in the stock market, they begin to

reprioritize their lives.

"I think this has been kind of a call for people in terms of looking at how they view money, the need to get out of debt and investing in things that are more eternal," Strickland says.

Calvary Chapel Chino Hills

As host of the recent Southern California Prophecy Conference, Calvary Chapel Chino Hills pastor Jack Hibbs says he's amazed an overflow crowd of 7,000 people attended to hear speakers such as Left Behind series co-author Tim LaHaye and *The Day the Dollar Died* author Paul McGuire. Hibbs says as the economic downturn has worsened, Bible prophecy has become a hot topic. And in these troubling times, churches offering people hope are experiencing rapid growth. Attendance at his church has increased 40 percent, from 5,000 to 7,000, in recent months.

"What is the fervor all about? Well, The History Channel just showed *7 Signs of the Apocalypse*, featuring Paul McGuire and Joel Rosenberg," Hibbs says. "And around the world, we know there is Messiah talk. ... Israel has banners posted saying the Messiah is coming soon. Iran is looking for the return of the Messiah also."

Hibbs says a growing number of people are asking him after services what the Bible says about what is happening in the world. "People are looking for answers," Hibbs says. "I'm not watering down the message. ... I've got Ferraris and Bentleys showing up in our parking lot. People are asking what is going on."

Christian Cultural Center

At the Christian Cultural Center, A.R. Bernard says membership has grown from 29,000 to nearly 32,000 in recent months, an uptick he attributes to the tendency of people to reach out to God in times of crisis and economic turmoil. Also, many Americans have heard sermons, read Bible prophecy books or watched TV shows detailing events expected to occur before the second coming. Bernard says as people hear world leaders calling for a global currency and global governance, they recall things they've heard about Bible prophecy and their curiosity is piqued.

"People are hearing British Prime Minister Gordon Brown speaking the language of governmental centralization," says Bernard, president of the Council of Churches of the City of New York, an organization that represents 1.5 million Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox Christians.

"When leaders talk about centralization of the economy, they are talking about things that those who believe in Bible prophecy are expecting, and that is the language of a one-world bank, centralization of political power, centralization of religious power and centralization of economic power. That is prophetic. That is Revelation. And, of course, prophecy always stirs curiosity."

The Church on the Way

In Southern California's San Fernando Valley, attendance at The Church on the Way has grown 7 percent, from 13,500 to 14,500, in recent months—an increase driven primarily by the area's large immigrant population.

"Immigrants come here and find that the American dream isn't all that it's cracked up to be," pastor Jim Tolle says.

As people lose their jobs and homes and watch retirement accounts disappear, many are seeking the peace that only God

offers, Tolle says. In response, the church is offering seminars training people how to create family budgets, change their spending habits and get out of debt.

“At the root of every human problem—whether it’s the Middle East, hurricanes, cyclones, earthquakes or economic downturns—there lies a spiritual reason, and people innately know that and begin to come home,” Tolle says.

Fresh Anointing House of Worship

Kyle Searcy, pastor of the Fresh Anointing House of Worship in Montgomery, Alabama, believes when things get darker in the world, the light of the church shines brighter. Searcy says that helps explain why church attendance has grown from 1,000 to 1,100 in recent months.

“Something started happening in our church—a lot more glory, clarity, vision and revelation is being released, just as things became darker,” Searcy says. In a church with a Forerunner Ministry that focuses on the second coming, Searcy says the Bible gives four reasons why crises occur—the sins of humanity, the groans of creation, God’s judgment and Satan’s fury. Searcy says a combination of those factors is behind the economic meltdown and growing turmoil in the world.

“But I’ve got great optimism and hope in these times,” Searcy says. “I’ve never had a greater sense of faith in my heart. It’s kind of weird. A lot of people are walking in fear, but I believe faith is really available for us to get a hold of.”

In this hour of tribulation, Searcy encourages Christians to remember how God is always faithful to bring them through difficult times. “He’s the same God and has the same love for his children,” Searcy says. “This is an hour for faith, not of fear.”

West Valley Christian Church

Each week, several breadwinners at the West Valley Christian Church in Southern California lose their jobs. Some parishioners have homes in foreclosure, and one man lost \$100,000 in the stock market.

Yet pastor Glenn Kirby says the nondenominational church has never grown more quickly. In recent months, attendance has shot up 36 percent, from 550 to 750.

"There is a spiritual hunger and openness for God that I have not seen since 9/11," Kirby says. "But this is a bigger and more sustained wave. The increase in church attendance after 9/11 only lasted a short time. But we have seen this now for four months, and it's pretty much every Sunday. It's a spiritual tidal wave that is sustaining."

Faith Church

In an area known as the new stronghold of the religiously unaffiliated, Faith Church is bucking the trend. Attendance at the church in New Milford, Connecticut, has increased from 1,500 to 1,750 in recent months as people turn to God for hope in tough times. "In these times, people want a message of encouragement, and that's the kind of message we teach," pastor Frank Santora says. "I think it's a relevant message. We deal with the topics that people deal with in everyday life."

The growth at the church flies in the face of a recent Trinity College survey, which found that New England has the nation's largest percentage of people who claim no religious affiliation or are atheists or agnostics. Although this percentage grew from 8 percent to 15 percent nationwide

between 1990 and 2008 while the percentage of self-identified Christians dropped, the actual number of self-identified Christians increased from 151 million in 1990 to 173 million last year.

Santora recently started a series of sermons titled "SOS: Surviving the Recession," and he has eliminated unnecessary expenses so the church can help those who have lost jobs or experienced salary cuts. He's saving \$275,000 annually from several cutbacks both large and small, such as putting the tithes and offerings envelopes in the back of the church seats and e-mailing the church newsletter. During Christmas, the church asked those who were struggling financially to let them know their needs. The needs were posted on an "Acts 4" tree for others to respond. The church was able to pay some of the living expenses for 64 families.

"Most churches in tough times might ramp up their talk about giving," Santora says. "But we wanted to reverse the message. Instead of asking them to give more as a congregation, we decided that we would give to them. Those that weren't struggling stepped up and took the place of those struggling, and our giving did not go through a major slump."

The Well Christian Community Center

In Dublin, Calif., Napoleon Kaufman, pastor of The Well Christian Community Center, is helping people understand that getting to know and falling in love with Jesus is "really the cornerstone of it all."

Since the church opened its doors in 2003, attendance has grown from 15 to 1,100. The line on the chart has gotten even sharper since the recession began, as backsliders and those who have never known Christ find the church.

"We see a lot of people coming back to Christ, coming home and

realizing it's not better out there," says Kaufman, a former running back for the Oakland Raiders. "Regardless of how much money you have or what the world has to offer, the only kingdom that will stand is the kingdom of God."

During this time of testing of God's people, Kaufman prays people have built their houses on the rock that will last. "My hope is at the end of it all, what we have built will stand the test of time," Kaufman says.

Victory Christian Center

As pastor of a young and growing church that has experienced an exciting move of God, Don Karpinen says he hears more people asking whether they're living in the end times.

" 'Is this the final stage of the world?' 'Is Jesus coming back soon?' "I think that's the question. And a lot of what we're seeing in the world does line up with end times' prophetic Scriptures," he says.

But the founder and senior pastor of Victory Christian Center in Boca Raton, Fla., says he believes it's not a "fear of the end" that is driving people back to church but rather a "passion for God that is consistent with the end times."

"I believe there is a spirit of Elijah in the last days church that is saying, 'Prepare the way of the Lord. The kingdom of God is at hand,' " Karpinen says.

As a result of the global economic collapse, many people have discovered their faith in the economy was misplaced, he says. Since the recession began, attendance at his church has shot up 55 percent, from 450 to 700.

"I think it comes down to the word 'hope,' " Karpinen says. "When you've lost hope, the church becomes the hope because Christ is the hope of the world. The church represents the

kingdom of God, and that's why I believe it's our finest hour. While everything else is shaking, the kingdom of God is not shaken."

Troy Anderson *is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.*