

Church History 101
Lesson 33
The Future of Christianity

Key Concepts: The landscape of Christianity in the world is rapidly changing. There are four significant trends which we will examine.

The Story: The first trend is that mainline denominations are declining and aging. These denominations include both progressive (Presbyterian, Lutherans, Methodists) and conservative (Southern Baptists) churches. The PCUSA (our denomination) has gone from 2.3 million members in 2005 to about 1.6 million in 2014. At the same time, Southern Baptists have gone from 16.3 million members in 2003 to 15.5 million in 2014. At the heart of this decline are two factors; churches are growing older and thus losing more members to death than they are receiving new, younger members; and the millennial generation (25-35 year olds) is not returning to the church. Thus there has been and continues to be a net loss of members and attenders.

The second trend is that even while weekly worship attendance in the United States is staying level at about 40%, more people are attending multi-site mega churches, rather than traditional, mainline churches. Mega churches are those that worship more than 1,000 people a Sunday. In 1960 there were only a handful of these churches. Today there are more than 1,600 of them. Currently the largest is Lakewood church in Houston which has almost 30,000 people a Sunday in worship. In addition there are almost 8,000 multisite churches in the US. These are churches that “beam” the teaching pastor from their main location into their satellite locations, in either the same city or across the nation. One of the most successful is Life.Church which has 24 locations in seven states, with almost 70,000 people a Sunday attending one of their churches. It appears that these churches will continue to grow for the foreseeable future.

The third trend is the growing lack of religious affiliation in this country. Overall almost 23% of Americans, and 36% of young adults, claim no religious affiliation. This trend is affecting church attendance in both mainline and mega churches. While the mega churches have a higher percentage of young adults in attendance, they are finding it harder and harder to attract millennials. Millennials see the church, as a whole, in a negative light and are seeking, what they call, “authentic” worship and community. They are thus off put by both the traditionally organized church as well as the self-help style emphasis which can be found in most mega-churches. In some ways the future of the church in the United States will depend on how we engage this generation.

The fourth trend is the shift of the church, in both growth and numbers, from the northern to the southern hemispheres. Churches in South America, Africa and Asia are growing rapidly. These newer churches tend to be more charismatic (speaking in tongues, healings, etc.) and conservative than the churches in the north, even when they are associated with existing denominations, such as Presbyterians. These differences are reflected in the conflicts between churches such as the PCUSA and the American Episcopal Church, which are fully inclusive, and some of their partner churches which still see homosexuality as incompatible with scripture. The growth in the southern hemisphere, especially in Africa is also being driven by faith healers who have created churches, some of which have close to one-million followers. These healers promise health and wealth in exchange for the contributions of the followers. Many African governments are currently discussing regulating these kinds of churches which may ultimately impact their growth.

Questions

1. How have you seen the church change in your lifetime?
2. How do you think the church ought to change, if you believe that it should?
3. What do you see as the future of the church?