

Associated Baptist Press

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Christianity making a comeback, pollster says; others skeptical

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- American Christianity may be experiencing a renaissance, according to one pollster. But other observers say Americans are so confused spiritually that tracking their faith is next to impossible.

A four-year series of surveys by religious researcher George Barna indicates American adults are turning toward Christ.

"Just one year ago, it appeared that the Christian church in America was on the way out -- out of people's minds, out of their hearts, out of their schedules, out of their future," reported Barna, president of the Barna Research Group, which conducted the surveys.

"But the latest in the annual series of tracking studies ... shows that the multi-year decline of Christianity appears to have bottomed out, and the Christian faith is now experiencing a renaissance of sorts," he said.

Barna's research focuses on the percentage of Americans who are classified as born again.

The survey categorizes a person as born again if she or he responds positively to two statements. Born-again individuals say they have "made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in my life today" and believe after death they will "go to heaven because I have confessed my sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior." Barna's classification does not depend on whether an individual would claim the "born again" label.

According to Barna's 1994 survey, 36 percent of American adults were born-again Christians. That figure rose to 39 percent in 1995, where it remained in 1996. But it climbed four points, to 43 percent, in January of this year.

The 7-point increase from 1994 to 1997 was more than double the survey's "sampling error," or the 3-point range of accuracy for the poll, Barna said.

However, several observers of U.S. religious trends questioned whether American religious faith can be plotted in an era of spiritual fervor, rapid change and confusion.

"I hope George Barna is right, but I haven't seen anything to document it," said Loren Mead, founding president of the Alban Institute, a national church research and resource organization.

"I'm not running into what he's running into," Mead said of Barna's surveys, although he affirmed Barna's approach to information-gathering.

"I haven't seen any very strong evidence of increases in church numbers on the national scale," said Mead, now an independent church consultant. "There are very significant things that happen in some local situations. But I don't think they are affecting the large-scale picture of religious adherence or enthusiasm."

On the other hand, society apparently is becoming "increasingly secular, and this is affecting our church membership significantly," he added. "Something is happening to our society and culture which is changing the world in which we're trying to do ministry, and we're not adapting to that very well."

All that change may be whipping up interest in religion, but not necessarily Christian faith, noted Ben Harbin, director of marketing planning for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board's church-growth group.

"There's definitely a resurgence of spirituality in America," Harbin said. "But there's a good debate over whether that translates into an increase in Christianity."

And it might lead to increased participation in extreme sects and cults, noted church historian Bill Leonard, dean of Wake Forest University's divinity school.

"What we're learning out of this California debacle over the Heaven's Gate cult is that Americans perceive themselves to be very religious, but it's very self-determining," Leonard said. For example, the Heaven's Gate cult cooked up its own homemade religion, blending parts of Christianity, eastern religion, science fiction and even music theory.

"Looking from the long term, we are in a period of permanent transition," he suggested. "People's religious identities and orientation move across a wide spectrum. There's lots of interest in religious life, and people move in and out of religious movements."

Such individualized faith leaves religious organizations and institutions "in constant flux," Leonard said. "It's very hard -- you can't predict where they will go."

And that makes "religious sociology naval-gazing," or interpreting the up-to-the-minute spiritual condition of modern America, quite difficult, he said.

For example, he noted Barna's latest positive report on born-again Americans followed by only a few weeks another Barna report that said American males comprise a "pagan subculture."

"One week he says it's all coming apart, and the next he's saying it's all coming back -- and he's probably right on both," Leonard said. Depending on how the population is categorized and how terms are defined, Americans appear more pagan and more Christian almost simultaneously.

Working in this context, the Southern Baptist Convention showed slight membership growth in 1995, reported Cliff Tharpe, manager of the Sunday School Board's strategic information unit.

Based on preliminary estimates, SBC membership increased 0.23 percent -- from 15,668,077 in 1995 to 15,703,884 last year, Tharpe said. For the 1994-96 period, membership increased 0.58 percent.

From Barna's perspective, U.S. Christians have reason to be optimistic.

"It is too early to say that spiritual revival has gripped the nation," he acknowledged. "However, there is an undeniable interest in spirituality among tens of millions of Americans, and much of that interest is being pursued through church-related activities.

"Realize, too, that these figures raise hope for the moral and emotional restoration of American society. Historically, societies firmly rooted in, and committed to, positive spiritual convictions are comparatively more compassionate and productive.

"If this spiritual reawakening of our nation continues, America's culture could be revolutionized, as evidenced by effects such as decreases in violence, emotionally healthy families, a superior work ethic and a more community-minded society."

Barna Research Group provided an advance release of its survey results to the media. The material will be published in the March-April issue of The Barna Report, the organization's newsletter.

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Church attendance up 6 percent, Barna reports

By Marv Knox

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- After bottoming out last year, American church attendance is on the rebound, according to statistics compiled by the Barna Research Group, a tracker of national religion trends.

In January of 1996, only 37 percent of U.S. adults claimed to attend a religious service during a typical week, reported religious pollster George Barna, head of the company that bears his name. That figure marked the lowest church-attendance percentage in 15 years.

But since then, attendance has grown steadily, attracting 43 percent of the population in January of this year, Barna said. That's about the same percentage as recorded in both 1994 and 1995, he added.

The gain of six percentage points has been fueled by increases in two primary segments of the population, Barna noted.

"The increase is partly attributed to male Baby Boomers. ... There has been a return to the fold among many men in their 30s and 40s," he said. "Another factor in the increase is the many inactive born-again Christians who have recently been reactivated."

The overall gains have been made in spite of difficulties with two other population segments, he added.

"There has been a substantial decline in attendance among seniors -- those now 70 or older -- surpassing the natural decline that would be expected as people reach their eighth decade or beyond," he said.

"Even more significant numerically is the low attendance rate among Baby Busters. This emerging adult segment, most of whom now are in their 20s, constitutes the second-largest generation in America's history -- and one of its most church-resistant."

Currently, only one out of three Busters claims to attend church in a typical week, Barna said. The pattern has not changed during this decade, he noted, predicting it won't change in the foreseeable future.

Beyond church attendance, the Barna organization questioned Americans regarding several variables of religious involvement. They include:

-- Sunday school. "Attendance in Sunday schools has grown significantly for the first time this decade," Barna reported.

This January, 23 percent of American adults said they attend Sunday school weekly, compared to a low of 17 percent a year before.

-- Personal evangelism. More Christians are telling non-Christians about Jesus, he said. Nearly six out of 10 American Christians told pollsters they shared their faith with a non-Christian in the past year.

-- Unchurched adults. Twenty-seven percent of all adults said they have not been to a church service, other than a holiday service or special event, for at least six months. That figure has remained stable over the past several years, Barna said.

However, 20 percent of unchurched Americans profess born-again faith, he added.

-- Evangelicals. "Evangelicals are a tiny segment within the adult population -- only 7 percent -- but form a firm foundation within the church," Barna said. That percentage has remained unchanged, he noted.

But this group is strong, he added. "Even when compared to born-again Christians, the evangelicals are substantially more likely to attend church, read the Bible, attend Sunday school, participate in a small group, volunteer at church and donate money to the church."

-- Volunteerism. About one-fourth of adult Americans -- most of them women -- say they are actively involved in church efforts during a typical week, surveyors found.

This figure has remained stable, "in spite of the pressure of frantic schedules and the desire to earn money to sustain a comfortable lifestyle," he said.

-- Small-group ministries. Participation in small groups and cell groups has remained proportionately unchanged for three years, Barna noted, citing that as a warning for church ministries.

"Many thousands of Christian churches have changed their ministry structures and programs to emphasize the development of both community and discipleship, primarily through small groups," he explained.

Consequently, stagnant small-group attendance "may presage a period in which millions of people's faith will fail to achieve the depth which many churches intend to provide through the small-group setting." That might mean the recent gains in church attendance cannot be sustained, since many churches depend upon small groups to foster relationships that will help newcomers bond to the congregation.

-- Bible reading. Only one out of three adults reads the Bible at times other than worship services, pollsters found. That figure has not changed in three years and is near an all-time low.

Only half of born-again Christians read the Bible weekly. Seniors (57 percent) read the Bible the most; Busters (27 percent) read it the least.

Barna Research recently released results of its latest survey to the media. The material will be published in the March-April issue of The Barna Report, the organization's newsletter.

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Barna describes faith categories

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- What's the difference between a born-again Christian and an evangelical? And when is a person who claims to be a Christian classified as not a Christian?

Here are definitions utilized in Barna Research Group surveys:

-- A born-again Christian is classified as someone who says she or he has "made a personal commitment to Jesus that is still important in my life today" and who believes that after death she or he will "go to heaven because I have confessed my sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior."

"Respondents are not asked if they consider themselves to be a born-again Christian," Barna noted.

-- Barna Research surveys classify people as evangelicals according to their answers to nine questions regarding faith, Barna reported.

First, evangelicals answer both born-again questions positively, he said. They also "say their faith is very important in their life today; believe they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; believe that Satan exists; believe that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; believe that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and describe God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today," he added.

"Evangelicals are a subset of the born-again Christian population," he said. "Notice that being categorized as an evangelical is not dependent upon church attendance, church membership or denominational affiliation."

-- People described as "not Christian" do not fit Barna's born-again criteria.

"Most of these individuals describe themselves as Christian, even though they do not rely upon Christ for their salvation," Barna said.

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-- By Marv Knox

FMB trustees approve restructuring plan

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- Following two closed-door sessions during meetings April 7-9 in Little Rock, Ark., Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board trustees voted in open session to unanimously approve a new organizational plan for international mission efforts.

Seeking to "bring all the peoples of the world to saving faith in Jesus Christ," the plan will divide the agency's overseas work into 14 geographic regions. The proposal, developed by a task force, is designed to be "flexible, responsive, change-oriented and innovative."

The goal of the changes, said board chairman Bill Blanchard, is to create a regional structure that is "more vision-driven and purpose-driven."

"God is accelerating a movement toward fulfilling his purpose of bringing a lost world to redemption," FMB president Jerry Rankin told trustees. "We are in the greatest era of mission opportunity in history, and we must be willing to make whatever changes are necessary to keep pace with what God is doing."

FMB leaders plan to begin implementing the new structure by July 1 and have most of it in place by the end of the year. The restructure will coincide with the agency's name change to International Mission Board, scheduled to take effect during the June 17-19 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention.

A key component of the restructuring calls for integrating the work of Cooperative Services International into all 14 regions and, "as appropriate," using its approaches to unreached people groups in each region.

Currently, CSI, the FMB's humanitarian arm which has worked in areas of the world where traditional missionary methods are unwelcome, is a separate department. Under the new plan, most regions will have their own CSI-type components.

Trustees also authorized the task force -- composed of trustee officers, some trustee committee chairmen and the board's senior executive team -- to serve as a search committee. The group will nominate regional leaders for election by the board and interview prospective candidates for associate regional leaders, field administrative associates and field strategy associates.

The plan calls for the current 10 area directors who oversee work in nine geographical areas and CSI to vacate their positions during the transition. Each will be considered for reassignment to any of the new positions, but to be named to one, each must be nominated by the task force.

In other actions, trustees approved spending \$6.4 million for building renovation and improvement to the agency's Richmond, Va., facilities. The project will be funded by \$2.25 million from a reserve fund and the rest from the board's general funds.

Sixty-three new Southern Baptist missionaries were appointed in an April 8 service at the Statehouse Convention Center. The service, the first of its type held in Arkansas since 1989, drew an estimated 5,150, making it one of the largest gatherings of Arkansas Baptists in history.

Rankin also highlighted the meeting's historical significance, telling participants that the appointees would be "the last foreign missionaries sent out by Southern Baptists."

"In subsequent services, we will be appointing international missionaries," Rankin said, referring to the FMB's June name-change to International Mission Board.

Arkansas Baptist executive director Emil Turner told participants that the service "is, perhaps, one of the most important meetings that has occurred in Little Rock and the state of Arkansas for a long, long time. We are convinced that eternity will be touched tonight."

Fifty-one participants responded to an invitation by Rankin to come forward to signify a commitment to missions service.

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-- Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine

Texas CLC examines ministry models for racial reconciliation

By Ken Camp

FLOWER MOUND, Texas (ABP) -- If race relations in America are to improve, churches must take the lead in building relationships across racial and cultural lines, a group of Texas Baptist leaders were challenged at an April 7-8 retreat.

Jim Culp, director of Black Church Development for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, said he believes that black-white relations in the United States today are the worst in two decades.

"If our nation is to survive as a peaceful nation and not be torn apart as others have been, the church cannot remain silent," Culp said at a retreat for the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and its board of consultants. "It cannot acquiesce to what is going on."

As part of a day-long discussion on the church's role in racial reconciliation, the moral-concerns agency examined church ministries that build relationships. Models included partnerships between ethnically different churches, blended churches and community alliances designed to meet common needs.

Two Fort Worth pastors -- one white and one black -- described an ongoing relationship between their congregations.

Stephen Shoemaker, pastor of the predominantly white Broadway Baptist Church and Michael Bell, pastor of the African-American Greater St. Stephen Baptist Church, said the relationship developed along two tracks. The pastors shared common commitments and a natural rapport. And small groups within the two churches met regularly to discuss ways to be community peacemakers.

As a result, the relationship moved from routine pulpit and choir exchanges to joint worship services, men's meetings and women's retreats involving laity from both churches, and partnership in community ministries.

For example, members of Greater St. Stephen Church work with Broadway members in serving a meal to homeless people each Thursday evening that includes a communion service.

"It's a nice, sit-down, family-style meal with cut flowers and tablecloths that our people share with the homeless people in our community," Shoemaker said. "When they arrive, they are given a warm washcloth to freshen up, just like flying first class on an airline. And the food is better than what our members eat on Wednesday night."

The deepening relationship between the two congregations helped them through tense times, such as when Bell spoke out against what he perceived to be racial injustice in the Fort Worth school district and its magnet-school program.

When Bell came to preach at Broadway during the school controversy, the church scheduled an open forum after worship services when members could question him and voice their own concerns about his position.

"The forum let it be something we could talk about honestly and not something to whisper about in the corners," Bell said.

Another pastor, George Mosier, described his seven years as pastor of the racially and ethnically blended Beckley Hills Baptist Church in south Dallas as "the hardest and most fun in my life."

"Credibility" in the community is essential for a church in a racially diverse area, Mosier said. He recalled two teen gang members assuring him that he was "protected" because he cared about young people in the neighborhood.

"I confess that it is a strange and wonderful feeling to be a protected Baptist pastor," Mosier said.

Willie Bennett, organizer for Austin Interfaith, and Gerald Britt, pastor of New Mt. Moriah Baptist Church in Dallas, described the relationships that develop across denominational, racial and ethnic lines when people of faith work together for a common cause.

"Over and over, you can get people to transcend race when you're dealing with their interests," Bennett said.

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Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina meets in Asheville

By Sue Harper Poss

ASHEVILLE, N.C. (ABP) -- Having outgrown its original purpose, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina has adopted a new strategic-planning process to help it redefine its mission in a changing denominational environment.

Those attending the annual meeting of CBF of North Carolina at First Baptist Church in Asheville April 11-12 approved the recommendation of the state Coordinating Council to move forward with the planning process that will begin with a retreat in Winston-Salem May 5-6. The goal is to have a plan to present at next year's General Assembly in Greensboro.

As part of its business session, a 1997-98 budget of \$80,000 was adopted; and Pat Cates, a member of First Baptist Church in Hickory, was elected moderator.

Discussing the need for a strategic plan, Michael Tutterow, outgoing moderator and pastor of Winter Park Baptist Church in Wilmington, said that change is sometimes "perceived as loss."

"The challenge of CBF both nationally and in this state is to alter that perception," he said. "The health of CBF in North Carolina is robust yet we find ourselves in a time of change. Already we have outgrown our purpose."

Tutterow said the challenge is to find ways to partner with other organizations in order to meet the ministry needs in North Carolina and elsewhere. The question to be answered, he said, is: "How can we remain proactive and not reactive as we create new channels by which Baptists in North Carolina can direct their missions and ministries?"

"We stand at a crossroads," he said. "We face a defining moment where we decide anew who are we and who do we want to be."

A part of the change that is taking place in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship revolves around the new leadership of Daniel Vestal, who last December became the national CBF coordinator. Vestal led a workshop during the annual meeting, saying needed changes will require proper resources.

Because of a lack of funding this year, he said, the CBF will not be able to send as many missionaries as in previous years. Vestal said it is important to both discover resources that are already available and to gain more resources.

"CBF must take some initiative and spend some money on helping ministers and recent graduates of divinity schools," Vestal said. "Groups like Friends of New Churches must be more proactive in starting churches."

The state of theological education was the focus of the two-day annual meeting which had as its theme "Bridging Generations." Primary speakers were Tom Graves, president of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, and Russell Dilday, former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth who is now a professor of homiletics at the George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas.

Graves said that even though church membership across all denominations has declined significantly since the 1960s, the opportunities for ministry have never been better.

"Institutional faith in our nation is facing the issue of survival," he said. "Now let me be so bold to suggest that's not bad news. In fact there's never been a better time to be a Baptist in our nation. The truth is the Southern Baptist Convention came apart at a very convenient time. For just when we should be learning to do church ministry in dramatically new ways, we've been forced to scrap all the old structure."

To be effective in changing times, Graves said, Baptists should put a renewed emphasis upon developing a personal relationship with Christ. "It's important for us at CBF to address this issue because for too long we have defined ourselves by our doctrinal differences," he said.

Referring to differences among moderate and conservative Baptists, Graves said "they" hold to the doctrines of biblical inerrancy, substitutionary atonement, virgin birth, and the second coming; while "we" put forth a "Bible list of Baptist beliefs such as priesthood of the believer, separation of church and state, autonomy of the local church and freedom of the individual."

"But let's face it," he said. "Usually our CBF gatherings have been meetings where we come together and have preach-a-thons, insisting that our list of doctrines is more Baptist than their list of doctrines."

"Those who have faith who have left our churches and have dismissed the institutional church -- they could care less about a denominational doctrinal fight and if that's going to be our only identity then we will be ignored and forgotten in just a few short years. What our culture is waiting for is a word that responds to the deep spiritual hunger in our nation."

Graves said Baptist principles must be nourished and not forsaken. "But that's not what America is looking for in us. And frankly it is not the most important point to faith. If a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is not there, first on our agenda, then nothing else matters."

Dilday spoke of the importance of being faithful to the task to which God calls each person, to the Baptist heritage, and to Jesus Christ.

"We as Baptist believers have a valuable distinctive belief. Just as we are responsible for sharing our faith we are responsible for passing on that heritage in a pure and undiluted form to those that come behind us," he said.

"Baptist is more than just a brand name. It's more than just a denominational moniker. It is a designation of distinctions that are very important," Dilday said.

Other officers elected during the business session in addition to Cates are: Randall Lolley, former president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, moderator-elect; and Jan Cartledge, Woodhaven Baptist Church in Apex, recorder.

The \$80,000 budget includes a new allocation of \$10,000 for new church starts and another new \$10,000 for international missions. The amount allocated for missions in North Carolina also increased by \$5,000 to \$10,000.

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Alliance, Cuban leaders to meet in Havana in May

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- Looking to strengthen its five-year relationship with the Alliance of Baptists, the Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba has invited U.S. representatives to a three-day meeting in Havana in May.

The chief agenda item will be a discussion of how the individual church partnerships that have formed during the past several years can be further developed. A pastor and lay person from each of the partner churches have been invited to the May 27-29 meeting.

The relationship between the Alliance and Fraternity had its beginnings in 1990 when the first Alliance delegation visited Cuba. Today 16 churches in the U.S. are linked with churches or missions in Cuba. Most of those will send representatives to the May meeting.

"The main reason for the meeting is to assess where we are after five years," said Stan Hastey, executive director of the Alliance. "We want to celebrate what's been accomplished and discuss how we can better be of mutual support to one another."

There are still about 20 churches or missions in Cuba that would like to have a partner church in the United States, Hastey said.

"First and foremost, these churches want spiritual partners," Hastey said. "Having a church in the United States that is aware of their situation, that stands with them and encourages them, means so much."

"Of secondary but real importance," Hastey continued, "is the benefit of whatever financial support we can offer and whatever medicines and medical supplies we can take them."

The meeting is to be held at Ebenezer Baptist Church and the adjoining Martin Luther King Center in Havana. At the conclusion of the three-day meeting, U.S. representatives will visit their respective sister congregations before returning home.

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-- By Sue Harper Poss

Baptist communicators award top prizes in six categories

STONE MOUNTAIN, Ga. (ABP) -- Baptist communicators from two Southern Baptist agencies, two state conventions and a Baptist state paper won top honors in an awards competition sponsored by Baptist Communicators Association.

Winners of the 1997 Wilmer C. Fields Awards Competition were announced April 12. The group, which last year changed its name from Baptist Public Relations Association, held its annual meeting April 10-13 at Stone Mountain, Ga.

In an unusual move, judges split the organization's top writing prize, the Frank Burkhalter Award, to honor entries in both news and feature writing.

Alabama Baptist news editor Laurie Lattimore took top honors in news writing, garnering one of two top awards, for an investigative report about a cancer patient refused insurance coverage by the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. The Alabama Baptist took six awards in news writing, the most in the category.

The top prize for feature writing went to Lisa Smith at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board for a feature in Missions USA on work in inner-city Philadelphia.

Editor Mary Jane Welch won the Albert McClellan Award for print media and design for The Commission, a magazine published by the Foreign Mission Board.

The Home Mission Board's Mark Sandlin took top honors for photography, earning the Fon H. Scofield Award for a black-and-white photo series in Missions USA.

Douglas Rogers of the South Carolina Baptist Convention took the Arthur S. Davenport Award for public relations and development for a public relations campaign for the state convention's 175th anniversary.

Alan Walker of the Florida Baptist Convention won the top prize for electronic media, the M.E. Dodd Award, for a video promoting the state's GA Camp and Father/Daughter Weekend.

Judging was by faculty members at the University of Memphis. In all, judges gave 107 awards out of about 420 entries submitted by more than 60 professional communicators representing 30 agencies in 15 states, said award chairman Trennis Henderson.

The Foreign Mission Board took the most prizes, 23, followed by the Home Mission Board with nine and the Baptist Sunday School Board with eight.

In a business session, Jim Veneman, a Sunday School Board photographer, was elected BCA president for 1997-98. He will succeed Sarah Zimmerman, a former Home Mission Board employee, who completes her term in June.

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-- By Bob Allen

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