

## **Top 10 predictions for the Church by 2010**

### **Dr. Thom Rainer**

I have some level of enjoyment looking at old predictions. Those pundits of the past seemed very informed at the time of their predictions. Years later they often look like some of the most uninformed people in their respective fields. I realize that I take the same risk in projecting trends for the church. Predictions are precarious in any field, and maybe particularly so for the church.

The American church has seen more changes in the past two decades than in the previous eight decades combined. Who would then be so audacious to foretell for the church? Such is the risk I take in writing this article.

Please understand that I make these predictions with less audacity than it might appear on the surface. My research team and I have studied more than 4,000 churches and interviewed tens of thousands of church leaders, church members and unchurched persons. I do not have a crystal ball or prophetic abilities. The trends you are about to read are based on current developments, which I have simply extrapolated to the future.

#### **Trend No. 1: The increasing interest in spiritual warfare.**

The wildly popular Left Behind book series is only symptomatic of the increasing interest in the world of spiritual warfare. And after the many pronouncements of the reality and presence of evil after Sept. 11, 2001, people across America are seeking answers in a world where evil is a present reality.

How will church leaders respond? There will naturally be extremes present in any movement. On one hand, some churches will continue to ignore the reality of the demonic world as if Ephesians 6 has little to do with their day-by-day existence. On the other, there will be churches that see demonic activity in every phase of the church life.

Church members must be taught the biblical balance of the supernatural world. Church leaders must also be taught the biblical precepts of spiritual warfare. In a survey we did of 23 seminaries, only seven taught courses related to spiritual warfare, and leaders of those seminaries indicated that the courses were among the most popular.

#### **Trend No. 2: The closing of 50,000 churches by 2010.**

Thousands of churches are on the precipice of closing. The conventional wisdom was that churches were tenaciously stubborn, and could keep going for years. But those churches were led by the builder generation, those born before 1946. The churchgoing builders attended churches out of loyalty and tradition. They would often remain loyal to a church despite deteriorating quality and attendance.

But boomers, busters/Gen Xers, and bridgers - those born between 1977 and 1994 - have no such loyalties. They see no need to remain with a church that exists out of tradition and with little care for the quality of the ministries. Though I am not happy to report this trend, the fading of the builder generation indicates the death of one out of eight churches in America today.

#### **Trend No. 3: A surge in the number of churches whose attendance is below 300.**

A trend that may somewhat offset the loss of 50,000 churches will be the starting of new churches with a planned attendance cap. In other words, from the point of birth of these churches, the members will not let attendance move above a predetermined cap, most commonly in the 200 to 300 range. When the

attendance approaches the cap, the members will plan to start another church. Of course, the daughter church will have the same philosophy of size and ministry, so the number of these smaller churches will continue to grow.

Why will these churches proliferate? Both the Gen X and the bridger generation include millions of young adults who desire the intimacy present in a church of 300 or less. But they have been unable to find many small churches that offer quality preaching, childcare, youth programs and the like. Therefore, they will start their own churches with a focus on quality while remaining relatively small.

**Trend No. 4: The incredible influence of the bridger generation.**

Those born between 1977 and 1994 will do more than just start new churches. There are fewer Christians in this age range than previous generations, but their impact will be more profoundly felt than the larger numbers of Christians in the older age groups. According to our research, as few as 4 percent of the 72 million bridger generation may have a born-again experience. Yet that 4 percent will practice a radical Christianity. They will take their faith more seriously, and many will go into dangerous mission fields, willing to give their lives for the sake of the gospel.

The bridger generation will not be satisfied with business as usual in the churches. And those churches that desire to reach the second largest generation in America's history better be prepared to give more than lip service to the cause of Christ.

**Trend No. 5: The increasing demand for clarity and conviction in doctrine.**

Led by the bridger generation and Gen X, those who come to the churches of the 21st century are increasingly seeking to learn the tenets of the Christian faith.

They are not satisfied with coming to church for the sake of coming to church. They desire to know more of what they believe, and they insist that the church and its leaders express conviction about these beliefs.

The churches that survive and grow in the years ahead will provide numerous opportunities for members and seekers to learn more about the faith to which they adhere.

**Trend No. 6: Stabilized church attendance with declining church membership.**

It is no easy task to measure church attendance in America. Even in a single church, measurement standards are often inconsistent or nonexistent. Many of the polls of recent years suggest that church attendance has been mostly stable for the past four decades. Our own samplings, however, indicate that church attendance declined from 1975 to 1999, and that attendance has been level for the past three years.

Attendance leveling must be seen as a positive development in light of a quarter-of-century of declining numbers. But church membership, largely stable for decades, is showing early signs of erosion. Is this trend healthy or unhealthy?

We believe that the better indicator of church involvement is attendance rather than membership. But the early indicators of declining membership may not be negative signs. Many church leaders, frustrated with nominal and nonexistent members, are purging their rolls. One large church recently removed 10,000 members from its rolls. Yet the attendance in the church has seen healthy increases. It would appear that the positive perspective of this trend is that more church leaders are taking church membership more seriously.

**Trend No. 7: The emergence of "homegrown" ministers in 30 percent of all full-time ministry positions in the local church.**

Most followers of American church life would express surprise that churches increasingly are finding full-time ministry staff persons within the ranks of their own membership. Our sampling found that 8 percent of all staff ministers were "homegrown."

We have been amazed to see the number of such ministers increase significantly in the past three years. The proportion has doubled from 4 percent to 8 percent just since 1999. Based upon these trends, we anticipate that nearly one out of three full-time staff ministers in the local church will be called from the ranks of laypersons in that particular church by 2010.

The implications are many. One obvious benefit is that each of these ministers will have an intimate knowledge of the church. The minister will certainly believe in the core values and the church's vision. And training time will be minimal since an orientation to the church will not be needed.

But a possible concern is the lack of formal and theological training of the minister. Some churches, realizing both the advantage of homegrown ministers and the disadvantage of their having no formal training, have partnered with seminaries to have the best of both worlds. Watch for this trend to grow in this decade.

**Trend No. 8: An increase in intentional evangelistic ministries focused on children and youth.**

Our research shows that 82 percent of American Christians became Christians before the age of 20. While this statistic is note-worthy, even more amazing is the number of Christians who accepted Christ before the age of 14 - 75 percent, according to our research.

A casual observer would probably expect churches to be intensely involved in evangelistic activity based on some awareness of the young people's receptivity. An additional impetus, it would seem, would be the large numbers of this generation. Most of them belong to the bridger generation, the second largest generation in America's history. The young people born between 1977 and 1994 exceed 72 million.

But the reality is that relatively few churches are intensely intentional about evangelizing or pre-evangelizing children and youth. Most churches seem to ignore their own data, which shows, according to our research, Vacation Bible School to be the most effective evangelistic tool used today. Most of the highly intentional evangelizing activity for young people has been led by parachurch organizations.

We see a reversal in this trend. Early signs indicate a significant interest by local churches in reaching and evangelizing children and youth. Some of the most innovative new church buildings are for youth and children. Church leaders are examining closely the numbers of conversions of young people. More leaders are becoming increasingly aware of the competition for the souls of America's youth. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims, to name a few, have not been shy about proselytizing young people. Look for more churches to become highly intentional about reaching children and youth.

**Trend No. 9: An increasing number of churches with succession plans for their senior pastor or minister.**

An abundance of research has made clear the importance of the senior pastor or minister in a local church's health or growth. Yet most churches have no idea what will take place when their present pastor leaves.

In our survey of 312 churches, only seven had some type of plan in place for when their pastor resigned, moved or died. We believe, however, that the trend will develop where more and more churches have some type of plan in place.

Why do we predict this trend when the current evidence seems contrary? A few significant churches have established succession plans, and many other church leaders are observing closely. Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, KY, one of America's largest churches, has a clearly established succession plan in place. Even though Senior Minister Bob Russell will not retire for several more years, Associate Minister Dave Stone is already in place to take the leadership helm.

This trend is beginning to take root in some mid-size churches with attendance of 300 to 700. We believe the number will grow.

**Trend No. 10: The emergence of a children's minister as the third full-time staff minister.**

We are frequently asked the "best" priority for calling and hiring staff ministers. Which position, after pastor, should be our second staff person? Should that person be full-time or part-time? Which position is next? The questions seem endless.

The traditional hiring pattern has been pastor, music/worship, and then numerous possibilities for the third. The third position may include minister of education, discipleship, missions, administration, or youth. The context and needs of the church, as well as past patterns, typically determine the choice.

In recent years, we have seen an increased interest in hiring a children's minister as the third staff person. In a recent survey of churches with three ministers on staff, 17 percent had a children's minister. The youth/student minister or the education/discipleship minister was still the dominant choice (53 percent and 27 percent, respectively), but children's ministers are gaining ground significantly. Undoubtedly, an awareness of the issues related to trend No. 8 influences church leaders in this direction.

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Thom S. Rainer, Ph.D., is the president of Church Central Associates LLC and founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is considered one of the leading experts on the church today. He has also served as a pastor and interim pastor in 10 churches and has consulted with more than 300 churches, denominational entities and other religious organizations.