

A Faith Revolution Is Redefining "Church," According to New Study

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(Ventura, CA) - For decades the primary way that Americans have experienced and expressed their faith has been through a local church. That reality is rapidly changing, according to researcher George Barna, whose new book on the transitioning nature of America's spirituality, entitled *Revolution*, describes what he believes will be the most massive reshaping of the nation's faith community in more than a century.

Growth of A New Church

Relying upon national research conducted over the past several years, Barna profiles a group of more than 20 million adults throughout the nation labeled "revolutionaries." He noted that although measures of traditional church participation in activities such as worship attendance, Sunday school, prayer, and Bible reading have remained relatively unchanged during the past twenty years, the Revolutionary faith movement is growing rapidly.

"These are people who are less interested in attending church than in *being* the church," he explained. "We found that there is a significant distinction in the minds of many people between the local church - with a small 'c' - and the universal Church - with a capital 'C'. Revolutionaries tend to be more focused on being the Church, capital C, whether they participate in a congregational church or not."

"A common misconception about revolutionaries," he continued, "is that they are disengaging from God when they leave a local church. We found that while some people leave the local church and fall away from God altogether, there is a much larger segment of Americans who are currently leaving churches precisely because they want *more* of God in their life but cannot get what they need from a local church. They have decided to get serious about their faith by piecing together a more robust faith experience. Instead of going to church, they have chosen to be the Church, in a way that harkens back to the Church detailed in the Book of Acts."

Big Changes In the Making

One of the most eye-opening portions of the research contained in the book describes what the faith community may look like twenty years from now. Using survey data and other cultural indicators he has been measuring for more than two decades, Barna estimates that the local church is presently the primary form of faith experience and expression for about two-thirds of the nation's adults. He projects that by 2025 the local church will lose roughly half of its current "market share" and that alternative forms of faith experience and expression will pick up the slack. Importantly, Barna's studies do not

suggest that most people will drop out of a local church to simply ignore spirituality or be freed up from the demands of church life. Although there will be millions of people who abandon the entire faith community for the usual reasons - hurtful experiences in churches, lack of interest in spiritual matters, prioritizing other dimensions of their life - a growing percentage of church dropouts will be those who leave a local church in order to intentionally increase their focus on faith and to relate to God through different means.

That growth is fueling alternative forms of organized spirituality, as well as individualized faith experience and expression. Examples of these new approaches include involvement in a house church, participation in marketplace ministries, use of the Internet to satisfy various faith-related needs or interests, and the development of unique and intense connections with other people who are deeply committed to their pursuit of God.

Seven Passions of the Revolutionary

In the effort to increase their obedience and faithfulness to God, Barna discovered that Revolutionaries are characterized by what he identified as a set of spiritual passions - seven specific emphases that drive their quest for God and a biblical lifestyle. Although these are areas of spiritual development that most local churches address, millions of adults who are the most serious about their faith in God were the ones least likely to be satisfied by what their local church was delivering in terms of resources, opportunities, evaluation and developmental possibilities. The consequence is that millions of committed born again Christians are choosing to advance their relationship with God by finding avenues of growth and service apart from a local church.

Asked if this meant that the Revolution he describes is simply a negative reaction to the local church, he suggested that most Revolutionaries go through predictable phases in their spiritual journey in which they initially become dissatisfied with their local church experience, then attempt to change things so their faith walk can be more fruitful. The result is that they undergo heightened frustration over the inability to introduce positive change, which leads them to drop out of the local church altogether, often in anger. But because this entire adventure was instigated by their love for God and their desire to honor Him more fully, they finally transcend their frustration and anger by creating a series of connections that allow them to stay close to God and other believers without involvement in a local church.

One of the hallmarks of the Revolution of faith is how different it is for each person. "It would be wrong to assume that all Revolutionaries have completely turned their back on the local church," the researcher stated. "Millions of Revolutionaries are active in a local church, although most of them supplement that relationship with participation in a variety of faith-related efforts that have nothing to do with their local church. The defining attribute of a Revolutionary is not whether they attend church, but whether they place God first in their lives and are willing to do whatever it takes to facilitate a deeper and growing relationship with Him and other believers. Our studies persuasively indicate that the vast majority of American churches are populated by people who are lukewarm

spiritually. Emerging from those churches are people dedicated to becoming Christ-like through the guidance of a congregational form of the church, but who will leave that faith center if it does not further such a commitment to God. They then find or create alternatives that allow that commitment to flourish."

How do most Revolutionaries justify calling themselves devoted disciples of Christ while distancing themselves from a local church? "Many of them realize that someday they will stand before a holy God who will examine their devotion to Him. They could take the safe and easy route of staying in a local church and doing the expected programs and practices, but they also recognize that they will not be able to use a lackluster church experience as an excuse for a mediocre or unfulfilled spiritual life. Their spiritual depth is not the responsibility of a local church; it is their own responsibility. As a result, they decide to either get into a local church that enhances their zeal for God or else they create alternatives that ignite such a life of obedience and service. In essence, these are people who have stopped going to church so they can be the Church."

Challenges and Opportunities

While the Revolution brings with it some very promising qualities - an intense pursuit of godliness, new networks of believers supporting each other, heightened financial giving to ministry endeavors, greater sensitivity to the presence of God in the world, a greater sense of freedom to be a genuine disciple in the midst of a secular society - Barna also pointed out that the Revolution brings great challenges to those who choose that pathway.

"There is the danger of exposure to unbiblical or heretical teaching. There is the possibility of experiencing isolation from a true community of believers and the accountability and support that can provide. It could become easier to hoard one's treasures rather than giving generously. Some might find it more difficult to sustain a life of worship without a place or means of expressing that praise to God."

Barna contends that these are very serious challenges faced by Revolutionaries - but that they are no more serious than the threats to the spiritual health of regular church-goers. "Objectively speaking, these are the very same problems that we identify among people who rely upon the efforts of a local church to facilitate their growth. We find plentiful evidence of unbiblical teaching in small groups, Sunday school classes and other local church venues. We know that few churched Christians give 4% of their income back to God, much less 10%. We recognize that most people attending worship services in a church sanctuary leave feeling that God was not present and that they did not personally connect with the living God through that experience. We have identified the relative absence of accountability within most congregations. So even though Revolutionaries face serious challenges in blossoming into the fervent God-follower they hope to become, perhaps the main difference is simply that they have a wider range of options for achieving their faith goals than do people who are solely focused on faith delivered through a local church. In either case, it is ultimately up to the individual to make sure that they have their spiritual priorities right, that they are investing themselves in

activities that draw them closer to God, and that they stay focused on pleasing God more than themselves or other people."

The explosion of Revolutionaries in the U.S., however, raises new challenges for people involved in ministry. "This new movement of God demands that there be new forms of leadership to appropriately guide people in their faith journey," Barna said. "It requires new ways of measuring how well the Church at-large is doing, getting beyond attendance figures as the indicator of health. And it demands that new tools and resources be accessible to a growing contingent of people who are seeking to introduce their faith into every dimension of their life."

An Introduction to the Revolution

Having written three-dozen previous books about faith and culture, Barna feels that this book may ultimately wind up being the most significant volume he has written. In the course of doing his customary national research studies, he stumbled onto the Revolution. "Having been personally frustrated by the local church, I initiated several research projects to better understand what other frustrated followers of Christ were doing to maintain their spiritual edge. What emerged was a realization that there is a large and rapidly-growing population of Christ-followers who are truly want to be like the church we read about in the book of Acts. We began tracking their spiritual activity and found that it is much more robust and significant than we ever imagined - and, frankly, more defensible than what emerges from the average Christian church. But, because the Revolution is neither organized nor designed to create an institutional presence, it typically goes undetected."

Revolution, published by Tyndale House, is what the author calls "a brief introduction to the most important spiritual movement of our age." He believes that fifty years from now historians will look back at this period and label it one of the most significant periods in American Church history. "I would not be surprised," the California-based researcher noted, "if at some point this becomes known as the Third Great Awakening in our nation's history. This spiritual renaissance is very different from the prior two religious awakenings in America, but it may well become the most profound."

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