

# **Barna probes why many small churches remain small\_92203**

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VENTURA, Calif.-Small churches are small, and big churches are big for a reason, according to pollster George Barna.

There's more at work than location and population growth, two factors often cited as reasons for church growth.

In addition to those factors, Barna said, certain types of people prefer small churches or large churches, and all size churches play a role in doing God's work.

On average, churches in the United States attract fewer than 90 adults on a typical weekend, he reported. Sixty percent of Protestant churches have 100 or fewer adults in attendance on a typical weekend.

Large churches, those that draw more than 1,000 adults on a typical weekend, account for only 2 percent of all churches.

From another vantage point, 41 percent of church-going adults attend churches with 100 or fewer adults present, and 12 percent of church-going adults attend churches with more than 1,000 adults present.

Based on a study of the church-going habits of 4,501 adults randomly sampled from the U.S. population, Barna discovered that small churches

are more likely than either mid-sized (301-999 adults) or large churches to draw people who are not college graduates and are more likely to appeal to people with lower household incomes.

However, an exception exists for adults under 35 years of age, who are more likely than older adults to attend small churches.

Barna cited two possible explanations for this pattern. First, younger adults tend not to have children. Families with children often gravitate to larger churches that offer more programs and opportunities for children.

Second, Barna said, the baby bust generation shows disinterest in baby boomer-led organizations and in large-scale enterprises. “Busters are more interested in being personally known and connected, which many believe is more difficult to accomplish in larger churches,” he explained.

At the same time, mid-sized and large churches tend to attract a higher proportion of “upscale” adults—those whose education and income levels enable the church to take more risks, be more aggressive in marketing and draw resources from deeper pockets and broader backgrounds.

Upscale individuals more often are comfortable with leadership requirements and decision-making and tend to be more excited about organizational growth, Barna said. He pointed out that large churches appeal particularly to boomers; one-fourth of church-going boomers attend churches of 500 or more adults, compared to one-sixth of church-going busters.

Adults attending mid-sized and large churches tend to be more conservative in their theology as well as their social and political views, Barna added.

The data should not be construed to discount the value of small churches, Barna said. “These insights simply identify some of the critical challenges

that the average small church has to address.

“Small churches play an important and valuable role in the religious landscape of America. They reach millions of young adults who have no interest in a larger church setting. They have tremendous potential for building strong community, as well as spiritual foundations. And small churches often grow into larger churches once they develop significant internal leadership and creatively overcome their resource limitations.”

And growth should not be only objective of the church, he added. “Jesus did not die on the cross to fill up church auditoriums. He died so that people might know God personally and be transformed in all dimensions of their life through their ongoing relationship with him. Such a personal reformation can happen in a church of any size.”

And despite the media attention given to mega-churches, small churches will continue to be the norm, Barna said. “We anticipate mid-sized churches becoming a more significant force in the future, with many of those churches spawning new congregations rather than expanding to become mega-churches. However, large congregations are here to stay and meet the needs of a specific segment of the population.”

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