

Trending toward what?

January 27, 2009

This week, Baptist communications professionals from across Texas (as well as the Baptist Standard's New Voice Media partners from Associated Baptist Press, the Religious Herald in Virginia and Word & Way in Missouri) are meeting in the Hill Country. We gathered at Camp Buckner near Burnet for an annual continuing education/fellowship retreat we call the Baptist Media Forum.

One of our keynote speakers has been Abe Levy, the talented and insightful religion reporter for the San Antonio Express-News.

He covers the whole range of religion, from Baptists to Catholics to Muslims, and everything in-between.

Levy cited "five possible religious trends." See if they line up with your observations and experience. Here they are, with some commentary from me:

1. The house-church movement is influencing the nation's mega-churches. Mega-churches generally are described as congregations that regularly involve 2,000 or more people in attendance. They're huge. Even for Texas.

But an even newer (and, really ancient) development is the house church—a congregation that meets in a, you guessed it, home.

For the past couple of decades or so, mega-churches did most of the influencing among America's churches. The leading mega-churches have practically become denominations within themselves. They're full-service, one-stop religion providers. And like their commercial counterparts, the "big box" stores that crushed their smaller retail competition, the mega-churches dominated the religious landscape.

But Levy sees a shift. “Some mega-churches are decentralizing,” he said. Many of them are starting smaller “satellite” locations. They’re starting home Bible studies. They feel free to form partnerships with other religious groups.

2. “The Roman Catholic Church is becoming more orthodox and traditional,” Levy reported.

Pope Benedict XVI has reinstated four bishops who have rejected the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which took place 45 years ago.

And, in a somewhat ironic twist, Levy sees ultra-conservative Protestants partnering with Roman Catholics on issues—but not necessarily theology—where they see eye-to-eye.

(Baptist church historian Bill Leonard forecast this 25 years ago, when he predicted American Christianity would begin to coalesce along a spectrum of conservative to liberal, rather than the traditional strata of denominations.)

3. Technology is impacting churches like never before.

Sophisticated church staffs are using mapping technology to analyze the growth trends—and needs for ministry—in their communities.

Also, “online communities” that don’t necessarily recognize congregational boundaries are building up among the faithful. They’re using the social networking programs, such as FaceBook, Twitter and other ways people keep in contact through their computers and cell phones.

If you don’t know what I’m talking about, ask a teenager or twentysomething.

4. “The laws for nonprofit organizations and churches will be reformed,” Levy predicted.

Levy has been tracking the work done by the U.S. Senate Finance Committee, which is investigating the financial practices of several TV evangelists.

He predicts new laws that will require more financial transparency among churches and faith-based groups, as well as other nonprofit organizations.

5. The evangelical community is changing rapidly.

“Natural alliances are forming,” Levy observed. He noted recent trends in which evangelicals have broadened their agendas to address poverty and global health, as well as their traditional emphases on abortion and homosexuality.

These alliances are decentralizing churches and ministries, enabling evangelicals to band together across traditional borders, such as denomination, to work on new projects.