

Broader view could inspire more Christians to share their faith

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By some estimates, more than 85 percent of Christian congregations in the United States include the word “evangelism” in their mission statements.

But some Christian leaders claim surface commitment to what they call the church’s essential task isn’t reflected in the daily lives of those congregations’ adherents—and it shows.

The much-discussed rise of the “nones”—the group of one in five Americans who have no religious affiliation—is only the latest evidence cited that evangelism in the United States is in disarray. Church attendance has declined for decades—to about 40 percent, the [Gallup organization](#) reports, although some pollsters put the figure closer to 20 percent.

Is evangelism on the ropes?

If so, the culprit may lie partly in a pervasive discomfort among Christians in sharing their encounter with God through Christ. Only 1 percent of “born again” adults claim a “gift of evangelism,” the [Barna Group](#) reported three years ago—a drop from 4 percent over the preceding decade. Among pastors, the figure is 8 percent, the group found in a separate study.

That suggests a profound uneasiness among Christians in discussing a foundational aspect of their lives—a curious reluctance in a country where every day, more than 168 million people post even the most banal details of their lives on Facebook.

“I think that people just have this core desire to express who they are. And I think that’s always existed,” social media mogul Mark Zuckerberg said, explaining the success of his Facebook empire.

If that core desire doesn’t extend to spiritual matters, it may be due to uncertainty about the nature of evangelism.

“I think we’ve got to decide what evangelism is and what it isn’t,” said Jim Somerville, pastor of [First Baptist Church in Richmond, Va.](#) “The root of this word is ‘good news,’ but some people preach it like this: ‘I’ve got good news! God loves you so much that if you believe in his son Jesus, he won’t punish you in the flames of hell forever!’ That doesn’t sound like good news to me. It sounds like a threat.”

Keith Herron, pastor of [Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo.](#), insists a limited definition of evangelism stymies Christians’ enthusiasm for embracing it.



“We have a conflict on this issue, because we only have an evangelical model with bullet points of content and a contractual agreement in the form of ‘The Sinner’s Prayer’ and supposed conversion,” he said.

A clear understanding of evangelism is essential to effectively engaging it,

said George Bullard, a church consultant and blogger.

“While various theologians want to define evangelism, the more important thing is whether a congregation has for themselves a clear core value about what it is,” he said.

Bullard cited a study by church-growth experts Kirk Hadaway and Dean Hoge. “They said that denominations which decline haven’t figured out what evangelism means to them and aren’t being intentional about it.”

Complicating the evangelism debate is a resistance among some Christians to identify with the fiery methods of the past, which they associate with an extreme brand of fundamentalism, Bullard said.

“Too many moderate to progressive congregations have decided that believing in church growth is a negative thing,” he blogged last year. “Believing in evangelism may be even worse. They do this to the detriment of their long-term future, and the vitality and vibrancy of the ministry they hold dear. ...

“It seems that moderate to progressive congregations forget their congregation came into existence because someone saw the need to plant a new church that reached pre-Christians, unchurched persons, under-churched persons or mobile persons moving into new communities,” he added. “If someone in the past had not had an attractional focus, then many moderate to progressive congregations would never have existed.”

“I believe we don’t have a theology of evangelism as [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) or moderate Baptists,” said Herron, who serves as moderator of the CBF. “We’ve dropped what we had and did not replace it with much.”

An expanded definition of evangelism could ease those moderates’ fears while increasing church members’ enthusiasm for it—and might, some say, find greater openness to the message in American society.

If a new spiritual sensitivity is emerging, a Christian evangelistic message “would be good news, indeed,” Somerville said.

“The angle I would take ... is that getting people to give their intellectual assent to a long list of theological propositions is not what Jesus had in mind when he told his followers to go and make disciples,” he said.

“I think Jesus really did want to establish God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. ... He wasn’t just trying to get people saved so they could go to heaven when they die. He was trying to bring heaven to earth. If we would get busy and help him do that, it might come a whole lot closer.”

“We (Baptists) are pietists, and our beliefs about conversion are grounded in Baptist piety,” Herron said. “I wish we could nuance the other dimensions of what it means to follow Jesus by doing what Jesus did as a sign of our commitment.”

Overcoming individuals’ reluctance to discuss their faith will be key to success, Bullard said. It’s a truism that nevertheless is true—the Christian experience is shared most effectively one-on-one, he said.

“Broadcast and mass media don’t work,” he said. “Billboards don’t work. Newspaper ads don’t work. It’s only one-on-one or in small groups that people respond.”

Gene Wilkes, pastor of [Legacy Church](#), a Baptist congregation in Plano, and author of *Evangelism Where You Live*, views community-based servant evangelism as a way Christ’s followers can “build bridges of influence to the lives of those where they live, learn, work and play, as they meet concrete needs in the name of Jesus.”

Wilkes emphasizes the importance of seeing existing relationships as places to share faith, rather than adding another place for people to hear the gospel.

“If you are a hockey coach, for example, offer a chapel before Sunday games rather than browbeat the team and their families to come to church with you,” he said.

Legacy Church participates in a citywide “love where you live” emphasis with other civic and religious organizations to meet needs, show concern for the community and build relationships. The church also sponsors a bicycling group that is about 20 percent church members and 80 percent people from the community.

“Our cycling group ... has been a great way to connect with the cycling community and to end up baptizing several over the years,” Wilkes said.