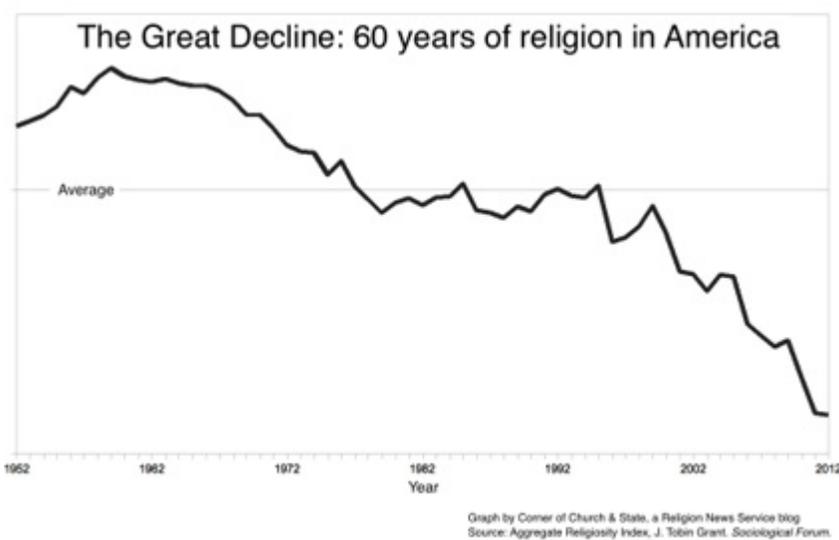


Varied responses to religion's 'Great Decline'

February 11, 2014

WACO (ABP)—A new study that shows the decline of religion in America may be worse than imagined, but it neither impressed nor shocked Craig Nash, community pastor at [University Baptist Church in Waco](#).



A recent Religion News Service graphic charts the decline of religiosity in America. (Tobin Grant/RNS) For years, Nash watched as study after study reported significant drops in key measurements like church attendance, prayer life and denominational identity.

"I feel like these surveys come out every six months, and they say the same thing," Nash said.

Worse yet, they keep some congregations and ministers so fearful they constantly try to dream up ways to keep people from leaving their churches.



Craig Nash “It focuses ministry away from helping people find their way toward God and onto accommodation,” Nash said. “It makes us ask, ‘Why are people leaving, and what can we do to get them back?’”

And the problem with that, he said, is it can make church conform to the culture.

“When I accommodate your needs and preferences, those needs and preferences become paramount,” Nash said.

Religiosity plummeting

[Tobin Grant](#), a political science professor at Southern Illinois University, who also studies religion, compiled the data that sparked Nash’s reflections.

In his [Corner of Church and State blog](#) for Religion News Service, Grant presented his case for what he called “The Great Decline,” accompanied by a graphic depicting the precipitous fall of religion from the early 1990s through 2012.



Tobin Grant The study tracks American religious behavior back to 1952 and overall shows a gradual decline beginning in the

mid-1950s and becoming more pronounced after 1992.

Analysts mapped the trend by combining several recent wide-scale surveys, and they used an algorithm to track more than 400 surveys conducted during the past 60 years.

“Religiosity in the United States is in the midst of what might be called ‘The Great Decline,’” Grant wrote in his Jan. 27 blog post. “Over the past 15 years, the drop in religiosity has been twice as great as the decline of the 1960s and 1970s.”

‘More to come’

In an interview, Grant said the study tracks behaviors—such as church attendance—and does not necessarily mean people are not pursuing spirituality in other ways or that they are becoming atheists.

Grant hopes churches, seminaries and other organizations may find the data useful in relating to the growing number of Americans who are turned off by religion or who have had no exposure to biblical teachings and concepts.

The numbers also can help clergy and congregations prepare for the future, he added.

“There could be a lot more drop to come,” Grant said.

‘This is real and undeniable’



Bill Wilson Church consultants like [Bill Wilson](#) already have found Grant's survey useful in convincing congregations they must change to survive. Wilson, founder of the North Carolina-based [Center for Healthy Churches](#), uses the study and graphic in presentations at two kinds of ailing congregations.

"Many congregations live in a state of denial or they live in a fear that this is their problem and only their problem," Wilson said.

The denial camp, he said, don't acknowledge they exist in a post-Christian culture and that institutional congregations are in great decline.

"A document like this helps people see this is real and this is undeniable," he said.

'Leads to a rebirth'

The other group benefits, too, by seeing their own declines in attendance and giving as part of a bigger trend.

"They think they are the exception and want to try harder to overcome what they think is a temporary setback," he said.

Such studies also can spark congregations into action, Wilson added.

"Just because we're in a 'Great Decline' is not necessarily bad news. There is some sense in which that decline leads to a rebirth of a more New Testament-oriented church," he said.

Wilson agreed accommodating the culture isn't the way to go. Instead, congregations must examine their reason for being as a way to craft a mission.

"They have to ask, 'Why are we here, and what is our calling?'" he said.

'Not a marketing thing'



Eric Elnes What churches need to avoid, when inspired by information about religious declines, are "goofy" responses such as "how to become more relevant," said [Eric Elnes](#), a United Church of Christ minister and leader in the national [convergence church movement](#).

Congregations must avoid adopting "whatever society is into and do great marketing," Elnes said. "They think this is a marketing thing, which it's not."

Instead, Elnes sees the analysis as evidence of increasing belief among many Americans that churches are about formality, and spirituality is best pursued elsewhere.

An example would be the so-called "nones," Americans identified in recent surveys as having no religious affiliations at all—some for their entire lives.

"I don't think they are losing faith," Elnes said. "Church has become the last place where people assume they can find a spiritual path—and it needs to be the first."

The church that evolves from “The Great Decline” likely will be one where people can find that path to God while allowing for a “healthy post-modern skepticism.”

And Elnes said he’s actually encouraged by Grant’s studies and others like it because a stronger, more engaging church will result.

“I find myself more optimistic about the future of the Christian faith than I have been in 30 years,” he said.