

Editorial: Fertility, evangelism & American Christianity

October 31, 2013

The future of Christianity in America may be determined by whether there's enough womb for the faithful.

Pardon the pun. But that's the truth.

"The most significant variable for determining a society's secularity is its fertility rate," historian/sociologist Philip Jenkins told a group of pastors at a retreat sponsored by Buckner International last week.



Editor Marv Knox Jenkins turned the world of missions upside down a decade ago with publication of [*The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity*](#). He documented how the center of Christianity is shifting from Europe and North America to the Southern Hemisphere. In the meantime, he became a transplanted Texas treasure—distinguished professor of history at Baylor University and a scholar in Baylor's [Institute for Studies of Religion](#).

The fertility rate is the average number of births per woman in a nation or group. If the average woman gives birth to 2.1 children, the society will remain demographically stable. If the births fall below that mark, it will age. Conversely, if the fertility rate climbs, the society will become increasingly younger.

Fertility and secularity

The relationship between fertility and secularity holds across the faith spectrum, Jenkins explained. Whether a nation's identity is Christian, Muslim or another religion, the lower its fertility rate, the more secular it becomes.

For example, fertility rates are plummeting in predominantly Muslim Iran and historically Catholic Ireland, he said. Within a decade, Iran could become strongly secular, and in time, Ireland could lose its religious identity altogether, he predicted.

The connection between fertility and secularity explains the Southern migration of Christianity, which Jenkins documented in *The Next Christendom*.

Compare the seat of the Roman Catholic Church, Italy, which is becoming increasingly secular, and Uganda in Africa, where Christianity is booming. The median age in Italy is 42, and the fertility rate is 1.41 births per woman. In Uganda, where the fertility rate is 6.05, the median age is 14.

Africa will be most Christian continent

That explains why, by 2050, Africa will be far and away the most-Christian continent and home to 1 billion followers of Jesus, Jenkins said.

The explosion of Christianity around the world provides reason for abundant joy. But the statistics don't look promising for America.

The U.S. birth rate fell to [a record low](#) last year. The nation received 63 births per 1,000 women, down from 69 births in 2007 and 127 births in 1909, when the federal government started keeping records.

The U.S. fertility rate now is 1.88—significantly below the level required for stability.

Economists cite troubling implications associated with that number. A shortage of young workers will damage the labor force and weaken the economy. A shrinking working-age population will place additional strain on Social Security and Medicare.

Troubling consequences

But with Jenkins' findings in mind, the trend forecasts even more troubling consequences. Our already secular society is tilting even further in that direction.

For Christians, the issue becomes a question of economics versus evangelism. Can we share our faith and minister effectively enough to counter the prevalence? Will we articulate the saving grace of God and embody the loving presence of Jesus clearly, passionately and broadly enough to offset the pressures?

We say we believe in the glory of God, the love of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Surely we won't throw up our hands and surrender to deterministic economic models. Will we partner with God to turn the trend around?

The faith of the nation awaits our response.