

The future for American churches looks a bit bleak

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by Randy Bright

Given the turmoil and the extreme debt that the Obama administration has brought to the nation, many are wondering what to expect for our nation's churches. A recent article in the Christian Science Monitor painted a bleak picture for Evangelical churches in America in particular, but I do not share the same pessimism that that author did.

I do think that American churches are going to see tremendous changes over the next ten to twenty years. Here are a few predictions.

Attendance at churches in rural areas and small towns will decline along with shrinking populations, but it may not decline at the same rate as the population. The ones that focus on being a "third place" and local ministry may even enjoy a slight increase in attendance, at least for a while.

This is possible primarily because there will be other congregations that do not focus on local ministry, and will likely close their doors, and because people are more willing to cross denominational lines than before.

Because state and federal government budgets will be impacted by the deep national debt, fewer resources will be allocated to small towns and rural areas and more to urban areas where funding can be more "efficiently" spent. Some small towns will become ghost towns within a generation or two, as young people move to urban areas for employment. In areas like these, home churches may be the only alternative for the few people who choose to stay.

The trend toward New Urbanism will continue to gain ground, as it has been for several years. Look for small and large cities alike to adopt new zoning codes that are form-based, and look for cities like Tulsa to create "no-build" zones in order to force more construction into smaller areas. For many cities, this tactic will not be a choice, as there will be many more regulations forced on cities that take federal funds.

This will put tremendous pressure on churches in urban areas as they try to deal with growth in attendance without the ability to easily enlarge or relocate their facilities.

If church properties remain exempt from property taxes, they will find more opposition to their building projects as local governments struggle to meet budgets for basic fire and police services, as well as the extracurricular infrastructure they believe they need to be competitive.

The churches that begin planning and preparation now will be the most prominent survivors in the urban setting. The ones that concentrate on long-range planning, ministry, tithing, and debt reduction will be more able to build whatever they need.

New church buildings will take on a new look, as locations for constructing new facilities will be smaller and in denser populations. The only new churches that will be able to build large facilities will be those that have planned far enough in advance to allow for it, or those in cities where those in power in local government will be willing to allow it. Multi-site churches will become a necessity for many large churches.

Look for many long-established churches of all sizes to lose their locations to eminent domain. Again, the ones that survive will be those who have alternative plans made in advance and are able to build elsewhere.

Because of the Obama Administration and the push towards socialism by liberal Democrats, the chasm between liberals and conservatives will widen, but the wider it is and the more persecution there is, the more the church at large will be motivated to fight for the values that they hold. I believe that there will be fewer mediocre Christians, and many more devout Christians, as many realize that they can no longer be silent about their faith.

The economy is certain to get worse, probably much worse, and the federal government will not be able to fulfill the promises of socialism. Churches that are prepared will become the new community centers where people go for help to meet basic spiritual, financial, and human needs. It will be a tremendous opportunity for the church to grow.

It would be presumptuous to assume that the church will fare better in the Midwest than in the East or West coast areas, but I believe that there is still a solid core of Christians in all sectors of the country. Though it will not be easy, and though we may suffer persecution as never before, I do not share the view that Christians in this country are so lukewarm that they cannot be motivated to be bold in their faith. Perhaps Obama and his minions have made the same mistake that the Japanese made at Pearl Harbor; they may very well have awakened a sleeping giant.

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This entry was posted on Thursday, March 26th, 2009 and is filed under [Columns](#).