

CHURCH ATTENDANCE RISES, DROPS AFTER SEPT. 11 LOCAL LEADERS EXPRESS REGRET AT STATISTICS

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Attendance at south Florida Christmas services will be at their normal peak this year, according to local church leaders. But, most see little if any long-lasting effects on church attendance following the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C.

Win Green, the pastor of Everglades Community Church (United Methodist) said that he expects a slight increase in participation at the Christmas season over last year. "People are more spiritually aware than they were before September 11, but that hasn't translated into increased attendance in general," he reported.

"Winter visitors are coming back, so our attendance is increasing due to that," reported Rev. David Haun, interim pastor of First Congregational Church in Ft. Lauderdale. "We didn't experience either a peak or a drop, we have just held steady," he said.

"Our attendance has been pretty stable," reports Rev. Antonio Zotti, pastor of the First Assembly of God church in Hollywood. "Our church membership is always increasing through normal church growth, but our increase has not happened because of September 11."

Reflecting a different reality, Pastor Greg Schaffer of Dania Heights Baptist Church said that his church experienced a peak of attendance following the attacks, then declined, but to a level higher than before September 11. "We have had some people come to church and stay because of those events," he said.

While current levels of adult attendance are higher than before the attack nationally, they are not statistically different than the numbers recorded last year, according to a study by the Barna Research Group, a California-based marketing research company that provides information and analysis regarding cultural trends and the Christian Church. The Barna group says that current statistics reflect a typical seasonal increase

It appears that attendance, which nationwide increased by perhaps 25 percent immediately after the attack, is back to normal levels. Barna's November survey found 48% of adults attending on a typical weekend.

The experience of the Miramar Evangelical Free Church is similar to the nation wide trend. "We saw a spike for three weeks after September 11, but we are back where we were," said Pastor Chris Johnson.

Johnson attributes the return to normal to people's readjustment to life. "The shock wore off," he said, "but people aren't as secure and safe as they used to be. There is apprehension and anxiety." Johnson said he expects a slight increase in attendance at Christmas services, but "not enough to be noticed."

“Attendance is back to where it was before September 11, unfortunately,” reflected Richard Calabria, Parish Administrator for St. Andrews Roman Catholic Church in Coral Springs. “During a crisis, people have no place to go except to God. But, when things get back to normal and they find that they were not personally affected, they did not know anyone killed in the disaster, they did not lose their jobs, they go back to their old patterns,” he said.

While attendance has remained basically the same at the Sunrise Jewish Center, Temple Sha'aray Tzedek in Sunrise, member's conversations have changed according to Ellen Helfgott, secretary to the Temple's rabbi. “They are listening more attentively to the sermons and wanting more comfort in them,” she said. “They are talking about the meaning of the events.”

Nationally, the Barna group reported that:

- concern about the future is now much higher than pre-attack levels
- church attendance is the only religious practice to have increased, and it is gradually deflating to pre-attack levels
- spiritual beliefs remain virtually unchanged - except for an increase in doubt about the existence of Satan
- there has been a substantial decrease in belief in absolute moral truth
- there has been no change in the percentage of adults who have accepted Christ as their savior

Barna also reports that while participation in prayer and Bible study was reported to have increased immediately after the attacks, recent surveys show that these practices have returned to their pre-September 11 levels.

Responding to the disappointment of Christian leaders who have been exposed to these findings, George Barna, who directed the study, explained that, "after the attack, millions of nominally churching or generally irreligious Americans were desperately seeking something that would restore stability and a sense of meaning to life.”

“Fortunately, many of them turned to the church. Unfortunately, few of them experienced anything that was sufficiently life changing to capture their attention and their allegiance. They tended to appreciate the moments of comfort they received, but were unaware of anything sufficiently unique or beneficial as to redesign their lifestyle to integrate a deeper level of spiritual involvement.”

“Our assessment is that churches succeeded at putting on a friendly face but failed at motivating the vast majority of spiritual explorers to connect with Christ in a more intimate or intense manner.”

South Florida church leaders reflected that same level of disappointment. “Things really haven't changed that much,” reported Bob Crick, an Associate Pastor at Cooper City

Church of God. “We saw an increase right after the attacks, but things have settled back to normal.”

The complete Barna report may be found on the web at <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/Home.asp>

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