

## Public Opinion and the Church.

Politicians are not the only ones constantly checking opinion polls. Evangelicals are also on the poll bandwagon. Some apparently worry when they are unable to get hold of the latest Gallup report or Barna survey. The results of the survey and polls are used to gauge the health of evangelicalism, to plan outreach strategies, and to discover the attitude of the unchurched toward the institutional church. Polling showed that the real story in American religion turned out to be not the mainline churches. Instead, they were cast into the role of the traditional "fuddy-duddies" in contrast to the vital and resilient evangelicals. Polling has contributed mightily to the impression that evangelicalism is one of the most influential, fastest growing, and conservative branch of Christianity in America. Ever since the 1970s polls show that evangelicalism claims between twenty and forty million American citizens. Surveys also demonstrate the far-reaching effect of the mass media on the opinions and spiritual growth of church members. In *Deconstructing Evangelicalism* Dr. D.G. Hart argues that the results of these polls "can appear very impressive and have undoubtedly influenced politicians and religious enterprises in search of Americans who share certain values."

### The Canadian Experience

But not only American evangelicalism showed impressive gains. Polls showed that in the mid-1990s one in six Canadians might be considered evangelical. A spring 1993 cover story in Canada's weekly, *MacLean's*, "God Is Alive" was the title of the article, which reported on the finding of a nationwide telephone survey conducted in early 1993 by the Gallup organization of Canada and the Angus Reid Group and funded in part by the evangelically friendly Pew Charitable Trust. The results contradicted the image of Canadian society as agonistic and secular. As the *Maclean's* reporter put it, the poll portrayed "Canada as an overwhelmingly Christian nation, not only in name, but in belief." On the basis of an Angus Reid Group polling results, Canada's leading evangelical, Brian Stiller, claimed that there is a high level of acceptance among Canadians for orthodox Christian beliefs. He said that the challenge for church leaders is to connect that overall acceptance with a heartfelt experience and commitment to Jesus Christ. (*Faith Today*, Jan/Febr.1997).

### Gallup Surveys

America's polling pacesetter was George Horace Gallup (1901-84). In 1935 he founded the American Institute of Public Opinion, and developed the Gallup polls for testing the state of public opinion. He was a pioneer in gauging public sentiment and turning that information into a marketable commodity. His son George Gallup Jr. was the one responsible for channelling his father's expertise and market research endeavours in spiritual directions. Over the course of two decades, he became a trailblazer in helping journalists and pundits find the path

to American evangelicalism. What was once looked down upon as a sectarian form of Protestantism through Gallup's help became the faith of ordinary Americans.

George Gallup Jr. had a unique career. He majored in religion at Princeton University, planned to study for the priesthood in the Protestant Episcopal Church and even taught at a summer Bible school for African-Americans in the South. He gave up on the priesthood, went into the family business where he was granted the freedom to measure opinion on religious questions. In an interview he explained, "The most important purpose of polls is to explore people's response to God and indicate ways to strengthen that response." Although the name evangelical has meant different things throughout the history of Christianity, for Gallup's purposes an evangelical had to "regard the Bible as the actual word of God," endeavour "to lead nonbelievers to a personal conversion," and have the experience of being born-again. When asked by Christianity Today, evangelicalism's flagship paper, he said, "I am evangelically oriented. I feel very strongly that a conversion experience is absolutely focal, whether it is gradual or a sudden experience." He added, "I would say I tend to be orthodox. In terms of creation, for example, I accept the authority of the Bible, but I would stop short of a literal interpretation."

Gallup Jr. always seems ready to dispense advice and offer predictions based on his surveys. When asked by the editors of Christianity Today about his prediction that the 1980s would be the decade of the evangelicals, Gallup responded that even though their numbers had not increased, their influence had "extended beyond their numbers." He declared that the strongest evangelical adherents in the United States were those who had a direct experience of God, people who feel "that there are miracles, that there are meaningful coincidences, that there is a pattern to their lives, that God has a plan for their lives." At the same time, he indicated that much of this experiential religion lacked "a sturdiness of belief." "There is a lack of knowledge of Christianity, a lack of awareness of Christian doctrines of atonement, redemption, and grace." At the same time, 60 percent of those tested said they were more in "spiritual things" than they had been five years earlier.

Gallup is also not clear in describing "believers." Who is a believer? Who is a Christian? In their book, *The Search for America's Faith* George Gallup Jr. & David Poling claim that if anything, the unchurched are believers. They pray, they believe in Jesus Christ. They think about life after death. They trust the resurrection story of Easter morning. They want their children to receive religious instruction. "In fact, with a few distinct variations.... the unchurched claim the same turf as the church - except they are not attending, supporting, or belonging to a congregation of the visible church."

Gallup claims that the deep spiritual hunger of young people is not being met by the established church. Polls give some interesting data on youth. Although a

1989 Gallup Poll found that the lowest church attendance was among the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine, teen attendance was the highest of any time since Gallup began collecting the data in 1980. Evangelicals believe that these data should alert churches and youth ministries and to encourage them to latch onto this yearning for spirituality and teen church attendance. In *Racing Toward 2001*, Russell Chandler comments that these findings surely pinpoint the importance of youth ministry in church growth, especially since about two-thirds of all Christians make a commitment to Jesus Christ before they turn eighteen.

Gallup Jr. has some strong opinions on the ministry of the local church. He sees cell groups as the wave of the future. Gallup Jr., speaking to a group of business and religious leaders, went so far as to say that small groups are "the most encouraging trend in religion today." For in them, he added, members learn the Bible and how to pray and are empowered for social service.

### **George Barna Polls**

Gallup readily offered advice to churches, but he did so mainly in interviews. George Barna, the man for whom the Barna research group is named, attended the megachurch Willow Creek, pastored by Bill Hybels. The application of marketing to church work gave Barna "a whole new understanding of what the local church could be." He quickly moved beyond statistics, graphs, and pie charts to recommendations for the health of evangelical congregations. He believed the church was in bad shape and that armed with an analysis of contemporary society, pastors and church leaders could make congregations more effective and evangelicalism more influential. In time, Barna became a consultant to the church growth/seeker church movement. His data offered inspiration and advice to congregations that hoped to be user-friendly and to transform American society. According to a 1990 Barna report, growing successful congregations "refused to be enticed into areas of ministry in which they discerned no special calling. Instead, they concentrated on doing what they were called to do, "such as focussing on teen-agers, single adults, the disabled, or the elderly." The report notes that target marketing is aiming the message and ministry at to those need and desire it, rather than broadsiding a larger, more heterogeneous audience. "Each church has been called to uniqueness and out to explore ways of exploiting its uniqueness in service of God." Barna has also some definite views of the pastoral ministry. He complains that seminaries don't prepare clergy to market, manage, forge relationship, and lead. "Seminaries should be the place where the average Christian can go and get equipped for fighting the fight of spiritual warfare," he says. He states that only a third of the clergy believe that their efforts to produce spiritual growth in members will succeed. And he predicted that by 2001: "After a decade of catching up to the behavioral patterns of the people they serve, clergy will have crisis conditions - divorce, alcoholism, drug abuse - at rates that approximate those of the population at large",

## **Taming of the Church**

Polls and surveys as agents of reform for the church are perilous foundations for Christian action and ministry. The validation of a normative position is not to be determined by mass opinion. In fact, public opinion may nurture the belief that the Christian church should tailor its teaching to fit the beliefs and practices of the majority. The result would be a common belief that the best church is the one, which makes the fewest demands on its people and makes fewest waves for society at large. Such a view would result in a church tamed, and the Christian faith turned into a gentle, domesticated, harmless private pastime. Furthermore, pollsters truncate evangelicalism. Sound-bite questions end up breaking down profound religious questions based on opinions stated without little reflection or knowledge. Dr. Hart observes that the curious aspect of these recent efforts to count evangelicals is the assumption that asking a few questions about the inerrancy of the Bible or a conversion experience will uncover those born-again believers formerly hidden by blunter survey instruments. He even argues that evangelism is a construction of pollsters and science of public opinion. He notes that there is no-good way for counting evangelicals other than surveys. He says that those curious about the appeal of evangelicalism are stuck with interviewers, multiple-choice questions, and regression analysis. He argues that opinion polls and surveys use questions that academics or pollsters device. In fact, these scholars arrive arbitrarily at an idea of what the Bible teaches, without reference to what theologians teach or churches confess. I believe he is right. What the church should teach and practice cannot be determined by public opinion.

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