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Revolution, not Reformation

"We might have to part with the notion of a popular Church. It is possible that we are on the verge of a new era in the history of the Church, under circumstances very different from those we have faced in the past, when Christianity will resemble the mustard seed that is, will continue only in the form of small and seemingly insignificant groups, which yet will oppose evil with all their strength and bring Good into this world."

(These words, from a 1996 book written by the then Josef Cardinal Ratzinger: *Salt of the Earth*, were not included in the English translation but in the German language original. They created such a flap in Germany at the time the book was published that they were omitted in subsequent translations.)

Across the entire spectrum of Christianity there is a common insight rising up. People who glimpse this say **that we are standing either before or right in the middle of a new phase of Church history**. People give this development different names. "A new era in the history of the church", says the new "Pope"; an apostolic reformation, a return to biblical principles and to the DNA and forms of church as in the days of the apostles, say others. And there is a new word circulating, of all things by one of the most renowned, church-friendly advisers around: US pollster George Barna. He says: "It's time for a revolution."

George Barna: Revolution



Sociologically, a revolution is a mostly violent and always radical attempt to change current political or social circumstances. It is carried by an organized (not necessarily secret) group of pioneers that finds the support of large segments of the society.

October 2005, Barna's new book, "Revolution", is out. Barna leads a wellknown and respected christian research institute and has, through his polling activity, become "the most cited person" in US-Christianity. Outside of decidedly selfcentred groups it is quickly becoming an accepted behaviour to speak of a (coming; imminent; present) reformation. What people mean with this is usually a foundational shift of the theological, structural and spiritual patterns that govern the live of a "typical" local church. However, many, like Barna, who have been watching the church scene for decades, conclude: there is much reformation talk, but little reformation walk. Many speak of a reformation, but in fact end up changing something to the extend of the editorial in a songbook. Barna breaks with this pattern. He speaks of a necessary revolution that has already started. This means two things. 1) There have been, according to Barna, dramatically few changes in the US church scene in the last 20 years. 2) A voice unsuspected for church bashing and rebellious traits comes up with solid numbers, facts and trends and says: we are in the middle of a historic change. Here the main points of Barnas new book (we had a prepublished version):

- Today we witness a radical turning away from the concept of a traditional local church being at the center of spiritual life of Christians in the US. Today only 70% of all Christians are visiting traditional churches; in 20 years, this number will have dropped to 30-35%.
- The number of followers of Christ that *do not* attend a classical local church will grow in the coming 20 years from 30% to around 70%.
- Alternative faith communities (housechurches, simple churches, postmodern churches etc.), attended by 5% of Christians in the US today, will be embraced by 30-35% of all Christians in the next 20 years; the other 30-35% will express their faith mainly in the areas of media, arts and culture. For the remaining 5%, family will be (or remain) the center of their spiritual life.
- Bottom line: a marginal group of Christians, barely noticed by many today, will become the mainstream of American Christianity in the next two decades.



This is equal to a revolution and will not only have radical consequences for all recruiting strategies of theological seminars and bible schools, but put huge question marks behind current and future building projects or expansion-dreams of church-as-we-know-it. Barna believes that this revolution is mainly carried by those that are currently young. Andrew Jones (Orkney; see his internet diary <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com>), well known in internet circles for his contributions in the area of youth churches, postmodernity and the “theology of blogging”, sees these changes not as something introduced by “important key people”, like in past revolutions, but through a new pattern of behaviour that gradually is being accepted by more and more people. It is being carried by people that have both the freedom and the space to implement such changes. Says Jones: “The style of this revolution is *evolutionary* rather than revolutionary”.

Barna tries, gentlemenlike, to soften the blow of this revolutionary wave for the daydreaming, sleeping churches and tries to rescue the honor of consumer-friendly, megachurch-fascinated, pastor and programme-driven churches, while he explains why new forms of churches (housechurches, simple churches, cyber churches, postmodern churches etc.) are necessary. In the US, so our current assessment, we have seen around 5.000 new housechurches emerge in the last few years so far. However, there is a huge “dark figure” of developments that has yet to be grasped. The number of networks of housechurches seems to grow rapidly. If it is any indication, the number of network-representatives of housechurch network at a national gathering of housechurch planters in Denver (Sept. 2005) has almost doubled in one year (for more info see www.house2house.tv), and Time Magazine plans to run a major report on this new religious development.

This is not going to remain an inner-american phenomenon, but has already gripped Europe as well; maybe even earlier this time. Usually, traditionally looking West rather than East for ideas, European churches often limp behind American developments at a distance of around 5-10 years. British church growth researcher Peter Brierly, after a steady phase of statistical observation, has concluded that at this point (2005), more Christians in England are found *outside* traditional structures than inside.

What does this mean? Church leaders will have to plan ahead in new ways. Statistically speaking, given a very few exceptions, classical church attendance will reduce to about half in the next 20 years. A church of 1000 in attendance right now will – *if they do everything right* – be reduced to 500 by the year 2025; one of many good reasons to review church building projects one more time at the last minute.



A Billion Souls – the last vision of Bill Bright

Bill Bright, the deceased founder of American mission organization Campus Crusade for Christ, had, shortly before his death in 2003, an astonishing vision that he has passed on to the ministry he has started. **In the next 10 years, 1 billion souls shall be disciplined through the planting of 5 million housechurches.** This, of course, is very exciting, and thoroughly would challenge a movement like Campus, that has been working mainly in the area of Evangelism in the past decades, in many new ways. After a significant financial gift in the two-digit million bracket for this “Bill Bright Initiative”, a group was formed at the end of 2004 to carry this further. Mid-September 2005 a conference in Dallas, Texas, will explore this further (we will report in issue 5).

Around 350-500 people that are ready to encourage massive churchplanting projects will gather together to discuss direction, best practice and other issues. Amongst them the new Asia director of the Assemblies of God, Pastor D. Mohan (Chennai, India), churchplanting coach Neil Cole (Long Beach, USA), but also Evangelists that, in the past, have worked more traditionally, like German Evangelist Reinhard Bonnke. (For more info: ww.billionsoul.org).

In December 2004, 65 churchplanting experts have come together in the Campus-headquarters in Orlando, Florida, in order to discuss and help implement this last vision and legacy of Bill Bright. President of this group, that has later received the name “Billion Soul Campaign) is John Maxwell. He describes this initiative as “the largest, global missionary initiative in church history”. Through the initiative, especially pastors shall be encouraged and prepared to experience exponential growth, mainly by planting (small) self-multiplying churches. James O. Davies, President of the newly formed “Global Pastors Network” reports that already more than 80 denominations and mission agencies have embraced this initiative.