

The Rise of Alternative Faith Communities A Look at Barna’s Revolutionaries from the Center for Missional Research

The “revolution” has recently become big news—many committed believers are rethinking (or leaving) the established church. Barna’s *Revolution* describes many trends, but the main focus is the move to non-traditional expressions of church (marketplace faith communities, house church, arts, etc.). Rabbi Gellman (who has some positive things to say about evangelicals in general), wrote about Barna’s “Revolutionaries” in *Newsweek* as one of the top religious trends for 2006. (His excellent article is [here](#); the second page references *Revolution*.) What Barna is reporting has not yet been noticed by many in the evangelical church, but *Revolution* will heighten awareness. He explains in his October 24, 2005, Barna Update:

Millions of people are seeking God without going through a local church. This controversial movement of people seeking to “be the Church instead of just going to church”...

Barna explains [here](#):

In 2000, most of the nation’s organized religious activity took place at or through local churches. Today, Barna’s research points out, the action is shifting to newer forms of corporate religious commitment. In a typical week, 9% of all adults participate in a house church. An even greater proportion—22%—engages in spiritual encounters that take place in the marketplace (e.g., with groups of people while they are at their place of work or play, or in other typical daily contexts).

In one chart, he describes the transition to a Christianity that is less connected to the church:

Primary Means of Spiritual Experience and Expression

	Local Church	Alternative Faith Based Community	Family	Media/Arts/ Culture
2000	70%	5%	5%	20%
2025	30–35%	30–35%	5%	30–35%

There is a significant group of men and women leaving the established / institutional church but holding to a form of Christian devotion. There is dramatic increase in alternative faith communities. And there are also some major theological concerns. Barna explained that his purpose was not to critique the Revolutionaries, but, instead, to report and celebrate them. It is important for us to see the implications of his descriptions, even though there are some theological and ecclesiological implications of his prescriptions that are of concern and that have been addressed appropriately elsewhere (see [here](#), [here](#), and my own [here](#)).

Who Are These Revolutionaries and How Many Are There?

Because the numbers he reports are so staggering, I asked Barna some follow-up details and asked him to be more specific, particularly on some of the numbers. He explained:

There are several reasons I did not emphasize the “exact” number of Revolutionaries. One is that I did not want people focusing on the numbers but on the way in which God seems to be working... Second is that people will start to quibble about the numbers based on the definition used; and, frankly, there are a number of different ways in which you can define Revolutionaries.

He goes on to explain his standard, which is highly evangelical and, I think, a good description of committed Christians open to new expressions of community life. He asked me not to share those details, but it is good solid stuff.

Barna went on in his e-mail (after explaining the approach):

That particular approach gives roughly 9% of the adult public, which is the equivalent of 20 million people. If we were to take a less selective definition, using several of those same criteria—say, born again, orthodox view of God, full-time servant of God, self-defined Christian, read the Bible and prayed in the past week, believe the Bible is totally accurate, contend Jesus was sinless, and attended an unconventional form of “church” (e.g., house church, marketplace ministry), worship God more than once a week—we’d be in the 25% arena, which projects to more than 50 million such believers. The numbers get even larger when you combine diehard Revolutionaries who attend an unconventional church with those [who] attend a conventional church.

So, based on his description, the 20 million people are not all “post evangelicals”... and not those who have LEFT the established church but those who are participating in alternative faith groups. In other words, if I am involved in Marketplace ministry AND attend First Baptist/Presbyterian/Assembly of County Seat, I would be listed as a Revolutionary if I met all the other criteria. A smaller (and I think growing) subset are engaged solely in alternative faith communities (house church, marketplace church, etc.). For example, [Barna’s people](#) have estimated that a million Americans are involved in the house church.

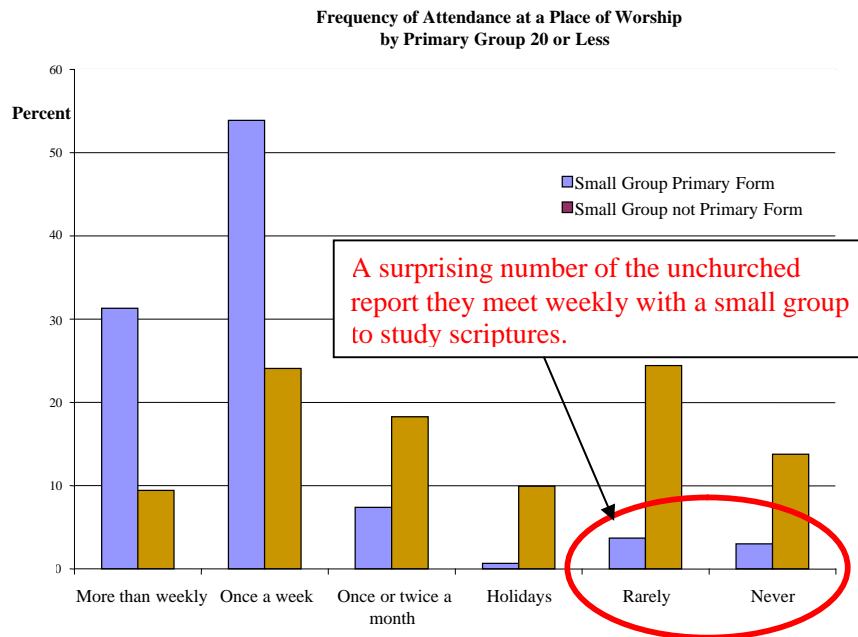
This house church trend has begun to gain the attention of even the secular media (often tied to Barna’s *Revolution*. *Time* magazine recently featured an [article](#) on the subject, NBC news did a television [segment](#), and CNN is working on a new story even as this is written. These would all be considered part of Barna’s *Revolution*. (Since ecclesiology, the theology of church, has become such a big issue among our churches, we, at the North American Mission Board, have created helps that explain what a church “is” through some [ecclesiological guidelines](#).) If Barna is right, these issues will continue to grow in prominence, forcing us to evaluate what a biblical

church is—and we can and must do so in the light of scripture, not just in the history of our tradition.

What About the Numbers?

At the Center for Missional Research, we wanted to go deeper to help inform our churches about what this trend means for them. Last month, we partnered with Zogby International to survey more than 1,000 people about several issues we will share in the coming weeks, but particularly about their involvement in spirituality and alternative expressions of church. There are some disturbing trends, for sure. For example, over 19 percent of self-proclaimed born-again Christians attend church on “holidays,” “rarely,” or “never.”

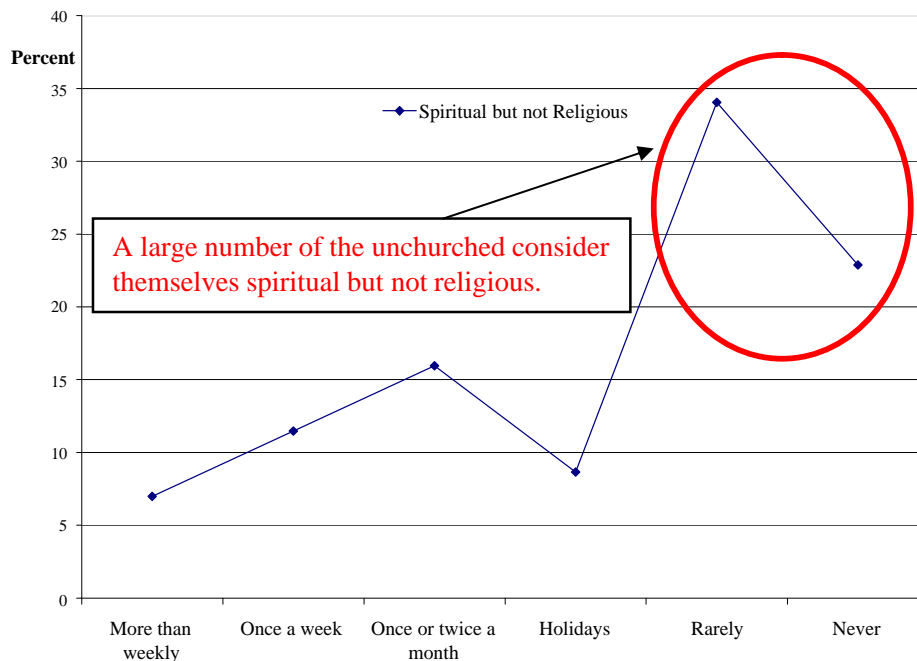
We asked, “Do you meet weekly with a group of 20 people or less to pray and study scriptures as your primary form of spiritual or religious gathering?” Remarkably, 24.5 percent of Americans who were asked that question indicated that they did—as their **primary** form of spiritual or religious gathering. It should be both challenging, exciting, and concerning that almost ¼ of Americans consider their small or house group / church / synagogue / mosque to be their primary source of spiritual training. However, most of those who consider their small community to be their primary place of spiritual encouragement still attend church at a significant rate. Only a smaller percentage of those who attend a small spiritual community do not also attend church—but that is still a large number:



When we cross tabulated the “small group” question with the “church attendance” question, 20 of 1,197 adults both attend a group of 20 or less and “rarely” or “never” attend a place of worship. If extrapolated, this is almost 2 percent of the American population and may represent the purest measure of those who are not involved in an organized church, synagogue, or mosque but still are involved in some alternative faith community like, in the Christian faith, a house church. That is about five million people—and is not a small number.

This may explain the number of people who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” According to our Zogby poll, a significant number (22%) of people consider themselves “spiritual but not religious,” particularly those who rarely or never attend church. The less frequently they attend church, the more likely they are to consider themselves spiritual, but not in a religious way.

**Frequency of Attendance at a Place of Worship
by Spiritual and Religious Self-assessment**



What Can We Learn?

While we don’t celebrate the revolution if it means people leaving biblical churches, we need to recognize it is happening and ask “why?” A few years ago we were upset that so many from our churches were turning from us to Islam or Mormonism. Now things are different. They have not been recruited to another faith, they have been repelled by the practice of ours.

We need to look more deeply into the Word so we can lead our churches to be more biblical—with biblical covenant community, biblical leadership, biblical church discipline, biblical preaching, etc. It does not matter if a biblical church meets in a cathedral or a coffee shop, that’s not the point. But it must *be* a church because God



has chosen the church to make known his wisdom (Eph. 3:10). New biblical forms need to be welcome and affirmed, particularly those that evidence more of the true community that many are finding in alternative faith communities. We need to bless all forms of scripturally sound churches. The church is not the **center** of God's plan, Christ is... but the church is **central** to the plan of Christ for His name and fame to be more widely known.