

Lausanne Movement
North America

North American Regional Report —

***ADVANCING THE GREAT
COMMISSION***



*authored by the
Wheaton College Billy Graham Center*

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INTRODUCTION

Since the close of The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 2010, North America has experienced tectonic shifts in culture and religion. The upcoming Global Congress marks a unique occasion not only to listen but to reflect on the current challenges and opportunities we face in the North American context.

While there are innumerable themes at play in both Canada and the United States, this report focuses broadly on the rapid and uneven secularization of society, the influence of both new and historic cultural idols, the possibilities offered by unprecedented innovations in digital ministry, and the transformation of the pastorate resulting from these societal and political changes. Within each theme, this report aims at identifying what these changes mean, the challenges they pose to churches and mission, and opportunities where leaders are working to advance the Great Commission. Looking to 2050, while the complexities and challenges facing churches in North America are daunting, we believe churches stand at the edge of enormous missional potential.



WHAT IS THE SOCIETAL INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY?

THE SECULARIZATION OF NORTH AMERICA

At the forefront of the state of the Great Commission in North America is our transition away from a culturally dominant Christianity towards a post-Christian or secular society. In only the past two decades, the percentage of people who identified as Christians in Canada has declined by nearly a quarter to 53.3 percent in 2021. Although a less dramatic decline, Christian self-identification in the US has likewise fallen from 78 percent in 2007 to 63 percent in 2022. These national shifts have significant variations across demographics, regions, and religious traditions yet together reflect a broad trend away from societal identification with Christianity.[1] Beyond identification, secularization is most tangibly seen in the declining church attendance and membership. In 2021, US church membership fell below 50 percent of the population for the first time in the 80 years Gallup has tracked it.[2]

This trajectory of North American secularization signifies a movement already underway in many other Western nations towards privatized forms of faith and the retreat of Christian traditions and norms that previously underlay societal beliefs and practices.

The Rise of the 'Nones'

Central to the impact of secularization in North America has been the resulting shift away from traditional or institutional forms of religion towards individual and internalized spiritual identity. Sociologists and ministry leaders identify this growing group as the religious 'nones', those who identify as 'nothing in particular' in public opinion surveys. In the past few decades, the rise of religious 'nones' has been one of the most significant trends in the North American religious landscape. In the US, the percentage of nones increased from 16 percent in 2007 to 28 percent in 2023. As noted above, in Canada, nones more than doubled from 16.5 percent in 2001 to 34.6 percent in 2021. Moreover, Gen Z are nearly double as likely as baby boomers to identify as religiously unaffiliated, reinforcing the urgency of understanding the unique challenges and opportunities of reaching the nones.

While this category is often grouped with atheist or agnostic, nones are characterized by ambivalence about established forms of religion and spirituality. Nones typically believe in God or another higher power, reject the idea that science can explain everything, see spirituality as essential in their lives, say religion does some harm but also does some good, and rarely attend religious services. Nearly three-quarters of nones were raised in religious homes, contributing to a broader societal trend of religious switching.

The Challenge of Biblical Illiteracy

A critical byproduct of North America's secularization confronting church leaders is the gradual erosion of a cultural literacy in biblical themes, language, and central narrative. For generations, church leaders in North America have benefited—and struggled with—a nominal or cultural Christianity that often presumed a common religious framework. These common definitions provided a religious language through which Christians could communicate the gospel, shaping North American missiological practices for generations.

The immediate challenge posed by growing cultural biblical illiteracy is our communication of the gospel. Without basic knowledge of the Bible, preachers, and leaders confront enduring misconceptions and assumptions of Christianity held by an emerging post-Christian society. Without firsthand knowledge of the Bible, individuals are susceptible to misinterpretations propagated by popular culture or biased sources. Biblical illiteracy can lead to distorted perceptions of Christian beliefs and values, hindering efforts to bridge cultural divides and foster mutual respect.

While a challenge, the rise of biblical illiteracy offers North American churches a unique opportunity for innovation and renewed missional strategy. As traditional models of evangelism prove less effective, leaders are forced to incorporate approaches to mission and evangelism that acknowledge diverse communities and perspectives.

Opportunity abounds for North Americans to revisit the story of Jesus afresh, rethinking how to proclaim the foundational truths of the Christian faith to an unfamiliar audience. Through returning to questions about God, sin, salvation, creation, and purpose, we discard assumptions about the biblical literacy of our hearers, choosing instead to recontextualize biblical truth to the new questions of meaning and purpose that animate North American society.

In addition, by embracing innovative strategies—such as online Bible studies, podcasts, and multimedia resources—organizations and leaders utilize new methods to broaden how we educate culture and the church on the biblical story. Through listening to marginalized communities—both at home and abroad—leaders are developing new pathways for teaching, proclaiming, and relating biblical truth in language that penetrates the defenses of ignorance and assumptions of a post-Christian society.

Looking to 2050, North American churches, while still influential, confront a society where their influence is rapidly declining. Christianity's previous dominance defined centuries of missiology in Canada and the United States, and its continued decline marks the need for a reorientation of our framework. Biblical illiteracy, the decline and inconsistency in church attendance, and the rise of the religious nones are elements of this tectonic shift that will continue to shape how we pursue the Great Commission.



WHERE DOES SOCIETY PLACE ITS HOPE?

The Hope of Politics for Protection and Victory

Societal hope in politics is neither unique to North America nor a recent temptation. Yet the recent radicalization of our political language and practices reflects a society increasingly looking to its political leaders and parties for salvation and—in many cases—victory. It is this promise of power over perceived enemies that appears prevalent across North American politics, weighing upon church leaders looking to remain faithful as prophetic witnesses amid brokenness.

A potent idol across society, this temptation to look to politics for hope has proven appealing to many Christians as a means of retaining cultural power and influence in the face of escalating secularization. This has been exacerbated by politicians, parties, and media outlets who enthusiastically play to Christian concerns over public morality and institutional control. In such cases, the good news of Jesus is in danger of being co-opted by leaders and ideologies offering the security of Christian hegemony. The result is often a conflation of Christianity's historic cultural prominence with our calling to the Great Commission.

Inevitably this co-option poses two challenges in Great Commission work. The first is that the degradation of our public witness as those who identify as Christian can appear to society as power-hungry and pragmatic. Compounded by championing ungodly politicians and causes, this has traded short-term security for long-term loss: politicization of our churches. Conversely, fear of politics can lead to a form of quietism that abandons it as a critical tool and part of our calling to engage our world. As two vibrant democracies, both Canada and the United States offer significant opportunities for Christians to engage the political process and advocate for biblical truth in the public square in a way that transcends party affiliation.

The second is internal division, as deepening fragmentation, division, and disunity among North American churches is often driven by diverging political allegiances. Far from a prophetic witness, ideological sorting within church membership and ministry partnerships can at times reflect political party lines rather than doctrines and mission. More commonly, the ferocity of political division can prove a paralyzing force for churches and ministries. For these leaders and communities, the challenge lies in enduring in both truth and love while knowing that this will never pacify the tribal voices in our midst.

While this cultural hope is fraught with challenges, significant opportunities exist for churches and believing communities to model a prophetic presence. Critical to this prophetic model is the ability of North American leaders to endure as ‘people shaped by the word of God, sharing the mission of God, and living under the kingdom of God’.[3] This will continue to require dialogue, grace, and forgiveness among church leaders as we strive to counter these pressures of division both culturally and within our pews and pulpits.

The Hope of Identity for Meaning and Significance

Personal identity in North American society has become a complex and central issue, intertwined with the continent’s historic values of individualism and autonomy. As self-expression, self-creation, and self-actualization have become paramount in society, identity has ascended as a leading repository of false hope. At their core, these idols offer simplistic solutions to intricate questions surrounding meaning, purpose, and belonging.

Navigating these idols can be a daunting task for church leaders. North American society not only celebrates but demands public validation of journeys of self-discovery, particularly concerning gender and sexuality. As criticism of these often elicits strong reactions due to their intensely personal nature, navigating identity boundaries can be fraught.

A significant concern in North America stemming from this identity challenge is the rapid growth of non-traditional sexual and gender identities. The rise of LGBTQ identities has not only revolutionized secular culture but also caused significant division in culture. This division is particularly conspicuous among Gen Z and younger individuals, for whom embracing diverse sexual and gender identities is part of a broader exploration for meaning and belonging. Recent studies indicate that LGBTQ identification is more prevalent among emerging adults than older generations, reflecting the evolving moral and religious landscape in which they mature.

Despite these challenges, there are missional responses that offer both a prophetic witness and pastoral care. Rooted in the imago Dei, a revival of Christian theology and missiology champions the inherent dignity and value of humanity, offering a counter-narrative to the prevailing cultural ethos. Additionally, reinvesting in the church as a place of belonging and mission can provide an alternative to the transient communities of secular society’s myriad identities. As the unified Body empowered by the Spirit and grounded in the Word, the believing community offers a communal identity that transcends individualistic pursuits, offering eternal hope in a fallen world. This community becomes a space where the gospel flourishes, and Christian witness thrives.

Faith flourishes when our identity flows from Christ and his mission rather than from any other identity, including from sexual orientation or socio-political context. By reframing identity questions within the context of mission, opportunities exist for North American churches to provide true and full identity rooted in Christ, equipping individuals for eternal purpose. The church can offer an identity in Christ that brings wholeness and fulfillment.

The Hope of Technology for Connection and Efficiency

While new technology and digital platforms offer expansive opportunities for evangelism and mission, this potential can often obscure the ways North American society has increasingly invested its hope in technology as an idol. Promising efficiency, connectivity, societal cure-alls, and happiness, technology has become an alluring savior for many, fostering a complex and evolving idol that challenges and opens opportunities for the Great Commission.

First, idolization of technology has reshaped cultural values of authority and communication, reducing them to branding or platform that amplify celebrity and tribalism over substance. As digital tools center on platform, social media voices are incentivized to division, controversy, and absurdity where questions of character and expertise are secondary, if not irrelevant. Within churches and ministries, this temptation can likewise elevate celebrity pastors and leaders with platform over leaders qualified through godliness and spiritual maturity.

Second, idolization of technology has fueled a cultural obsession with entertainment. Awash in content, technology has enmeshed media into our daily lives resulting in a society always plugged in and distracted. The result is a consumer mindset that elevates our need to be entertained over serving one another. This idol is particularly felt in churches and ministries, where consumerism can produce congregations and communities oriented around personal preferences rather than mission.

Third, idolization of technology has accelerated our societal pursuit of productivity. In contrast with the biblical vision of Sabbath, technology has accelerated our societal priorities of efficiency and productivity by invading our rest with work and busyness on a scale unthinkable only a generation ago.

Despite these challenges, our cultural value of technology presents unique opportunities. From radio to television, North American Christians have historically recognized the power of redeeming technology as critical tools in gospel mission. Christian pioneers are already leveraging online media and platforms to tell the gospel story in fresh ways, reaching communities that might never engage traditional Christian institutions.

As technology continues to revolutionize society, the critical task for the next generation will be resisting the dangers of losing what is essential for human and community flourishing while seizing technology's great potential. This challenge and opportunity lie in leveraging new technology while modeling to North American society its inability to save; it is merely a tool to proclaim the One who can.



WHAT IS MINISTRY IN A DIGITAL AGE?

The Innovations and Adaptations of Online Church

Few innovations have challenged and stretched our assumptions and convictions around church more than the growth of online ministry. The pandemic accelerated what had already been a widespread and rapid adoption of online church across denominations, demographics, and regions of North America. As the pandemic subsided, many North American churches have continued to leverage digital tools to retain their online congregations while returning to traditional, in-person formats.

First, churches have begun to leverage digital spaces both to cultivate a sense of belonging among the congregation and to reach their surrounding community. Far from a peripheral concern, churches are recognizing the central role that social media and online resources play in the lives of their people and as possible tools in discipleship. From hosting new believers groups on Zoom to encouragement videos posted to YouTube, local churches are increasingly embracing online platforms as core ministry practices. Today, the ‘front door’ of the church is quickly moving past websites towards its social media and other online resources.

Second, churches are experimenting—and at times struggling—with integrating online and in-person services to create a cohesive believing community. The expansion of online church during the pandemic unlocked the potential for local churches to reach and serve members in the community who normally could not or would not attend services. Yet as leaders grapple with the inherent deficiencies in online-only services, churches are beginning to experiment with hybrid communities that incorporate both in-person and online elements. Through utilizing online tools for small groups, outreach ministries, and bible studies, churches have begun to integrate online spaces as core to their discipleship and missional strategies.

As churches continue to experiment and innovate around integrating online and in-person spaces and resources, leaders face the critical challenge of developing a robust framework for both digital ecclesiology and digital missiology. Gaps clearly remain in both, limiting their use both as practical tools for churches to effectively engage digital spaces and as thoughtful guidelines for healthy digital mission.

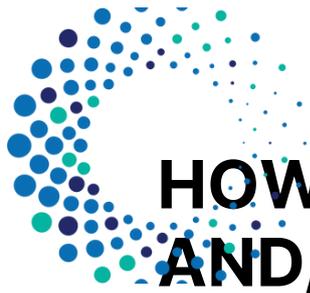
The Potential for Digital Mission and Evangelism

Digital platforms open doors to communities previously unreached or underreached by traditional ministries. Their decentralized nature provides new opportunities for innovation, from missions to evangelism to spiritual formation. The growing permeation of digital spaces creates opportunities to empower the laity to reach their communities. Digital platforms have made the gospel more accessible than at any point in church history and created a space to mobilize the entire church to reach the entire world. Further, many others preach their own 'gospel' through these platforms; it is essential for the (true) gospel to be proclaimed as well.

The most recent decade saw evangelistic ministries take witnessing online through websites and social media, creating live online events and online curricula for seekers and spiritual explorers. While the advent of streaming events was an iteration of broadcasting, the live interaction of viewers and the intentional follow-ups from event coordinators endeavored to fill in the gaps between digital broadcasting and personal evangelism, opening the door for more Christians to participate in evangelism online.

The explosion of online social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram offer potential for missional innovations outside of digital mission focused on evangelism. Evangelists on these platforms offer themes and topics that cover meaning, purpose, identity, mental health, and apologetics. The personality-driven, evangelist-influencer role is often seen as an everyday person journeying with the seeker in their spiritual journey.

As technology progresses, evangelistic ministries continue to manage the tension between digital broadcasting versus personal evangelism and content creation versus gospel proclamation. Many ministries are utilizing online meeting platforms as a middle ground, allowing them to convene conveniently online while maintaining the uniqueness of dynamic conversations and relationship building.



HOW ARE THE PASTORATE AND/OR CHURCH CHANGING?

The Power and Potential of an Emerging Gen Z

As the most ethnically and socially diverse generation, Gen Z has been shaped by seismic social changes and technological advancement. The result is a demographic that often rejects the conventional norms that define traditional religious life and approaches.

Gen Z has a drive toward independence and self-reliance, evidenced by its abiding confidence in 'figuring it out' without direction from authorities. The first true digital natives, Gen Z desires to be active participants in the conversation more than consumers or followers of an established template. Their natural skepticism of the inherent hierarchies of institutions leads Gen Z to seek opportunities that challenge and reshape institutions.

The collision of creative desire and disruptive reform leads to Gen Z's animating potential to reshape North American Christianity. Ministries that have successfully reached and empowered Gen Z have prioritized authenticity and open communication by amplifying their voices and equipping them to participate as leaders in the conversation.

As Gen Z struggles to reconcile religious beliefs with their desire for authenticity and relevance within shifting societal norms, they may be seen as rebellious rather than on a genuine search for understanding. Gen Z will likely respond with disconnection or alienation when churches either shy away from controversial subjects or offer authoritative answers without engaging their doubts and complexities. As Gen Z continues to hunger for meaning and identity, the church can help them understand how embodying Jesus' teachings in genuine and transformative ways can meet these needs and reshape our world.

The New Reality of Racial/Ethnic Diversity

North American ethnic diversity is beginning to shape and reshape traditional religious institutions. Preparing for 2050, the continued emergence of leaders of color in these institutions will be critical in their renewal towards greater effectiveness in evangelism and mission.

Churches in the US and Canada are rapidly diversifying ethnically as immigration continues to impact the demographic composition of both nations. For instance, the Assemblies of God in the United States has grown in membership yearly for the last three decades, in contrast to other denominations that have steadily declined. For many denominations, institutions, and networks, numerical growth is often a direct result of increased non-white membership, evidenced in the growth (until recently) in the Assemblies of God, with 'ethnic minorities' now accounting for nearly half of its membership. As people of color continue to gain influence and positions of authority in these institutions, they will be better equipped to lead the reforms necessary to reach a diverse North American society.

Through immigration, the global church significantly impacts how evangelicalism and evangelism look as we face the future. Multi-ethnic church planting has become mainstream for most North American evangelical denominations and networks. Heterogeneous leadership among church planting teams is seen as a demonstration of the gospel and a testament to a non-believing world regarding how the hostility between different groups can be torn down in Christ.

Some of the ongoing cultural complexities and increasing challenges facing the church's witness in North America are the convergence of historic issues faced by indigenous peoples, the US/Mexico border crisis, and residual institutional tracks left by segregation and racist policies. Part of the church's evangelistic witness is offering a prophetic voice amid these issues while appropriately admitting its biases and complicity, especially in its history and systemic structures.

The Evolving Shape of the North American Pastorate

Just as North American society is evolving rapidly, these changes are echoed in a shifting pastorate. In surveying the broad trends in a reshaping pastorate, four evolutions are critical for leaders to understand and engage in relation to the advance of the Great Commission.

The first has been the notable increase of public and visible leadership of women in varying ministry contexts. Among evangelicals in North America, recent data suggests a wide majority are comfortable with women clergy even as the actual numbers lag considerably behind.[4] Even as evangelical denominations and networks disagree over the role of women in pastoral offices, this growth in public perception suggests that women leaders across ministry and pastoral leadership will become a critical force in the reshaping of the North American religious landscape.

A second is the rise of nondenominational churches, where most church growth has occurred over the past three decades, with over 9,000 such churches added in a decade. 'The two biggest stories in American religion are the nones and the nons',[5] Ryan Burge observes. Nondenominational church membership would be the largest denomination if it were one. This trend impacts pastoral leadership from theological education to developing vibrant pastoral community.

In addition, a significant evolution among pastors is the rise of bi-vocational ministry. Particularly in communities without significant economic support—such as rural and urban contexts—the bi-vocational pastor is a necessity. These ministers and church leaders rely upon full- or part-time jobs that supplement their pastoral income even as they balance the demands of a full-time ministry position.

Parallel to the rise of bi-vocational ministry is the evolution in formal ministry training and education as church leaders shift away from traditional programs. The accelerated popularity of online education has and will continue to reshape ministry training as church leaders remain deeply divided on its short- and long-term impact. While concerns focus on the unintended consequences of moving away from traditional, in-person education, such as leaders being ill-equipped and under-resourced to endure in effective ministry, online education provides unique opportunities for ministry training including enabling church leaders to continue to serve local communities while pursuing higher education.

The Necessity of Future Sustainability Models

Across regions, ministry specialization, and cultures, few challenges registered as consistently and urgently as the toll of ministry burnout. The pandemic certainly accelerated both in terms of scope and severity as pastors and ministry leaders were often left to bear the weight of their communities and organizations. Yet while the pandemic exacerbated the crisis, the seeds of ministry burnout are generational, and the result is a clergy and ministry force near its breaking point.

As the Hartford Institute recently discovered, more than half of all clergy (53 percent) express burnout to the point of leaving their church and/or ministry entirely.[6] More than just the need for rest, the degree and urgency of this burnout speaks to the flaws in our system that is failing to equip, support, and sustain ministry leaders. As this gets worse with the impending 'Great Retirement' of Boomers beginning in 2030, North American churches and ministry leaders face a complex and urgent challenge.[7]

This crisis of burnout ushers in two new opportunities for the Great Commission as we look to the future. First, leaders can finally begin to rethink our vision of the sustainable pastorate, challenging long-held assumptions about what constitutes healthy ministries, organizations, and communities. Through investing in sustainable models for ministry in the short-term, opportunities exist for long-term effectiveness. Already churches are finding pathways for this practice through investing in pastor treatment centers to restore and equip pastors with counseling and rest.

Second, through both dismantling abusive systems and modeling healthy systems and communities, churches and ministries can offer a prophetic word to a North American culture predicated on burnout. Reshaping our cultural and church-based conversations of burnout around spiritual, mental, and physical health empowers the church to lead a critical conversation in North American society. By embracing our shortcomings, the church can better learn to empathize with hurting people, especially those dealing with trauma. As church leaders in North America put on a trauma-informed lens when it comes to leadership development, congregational care, and outreach, those suffering with ministry burnout can have hope.

These investments not only secure a pastoral and ministry force equipped to fulfill the Great Commission but testify the truth that it is only by God's power that we can build his kingdom.

Conclusion

North America remains a vibrant and complex mission field with considerable potential for kingdom work in the coming decades. While its pressing challenges require innovative and godly leadership, these should not obscure the countless churches and ministries at work proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel across the continent.

As leaders gather in Seoul, this report is designed as a tool for identifying key areas and gaps in our mission where we can collaborate, encourage, and resource one another for greater effectiveness. Far from exhaustive, this report focuses on the rising peaks of our missional frontier: secularization, digital ministry, our changing pastorate, and the defining cultural idols of our day. What emerges is a region amid seismic transition yet still with significant potential for innovation, collaboration, and global impact in the work of the Great Commission.



Authors

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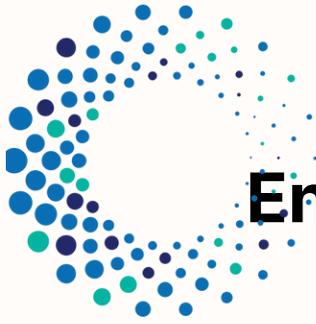
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