

## Summary of *Reviving Evangelism* (Barna, 2019)

*Reviving Evangelism* is based on research undertaken by Barna (USA) to explore the why U.S. Christians are losing the desire to share their faith. The statistics that prompted the USA research are not dissimilar to research carried out in Australia (McCrindle, NCLS, CRA).

The research explores the responses from a range of people about their attitude to evangelism; practicing Christians (attended church within past month), lapsed Christians, non-Christians (religious non-Christians, atheist, agnostic, nones). The research also explores responses from different generations; Millennials (1984 to 1998), Gen X (1965 to 1983), Boomers (1946 to 1964), Elders (born prior to 1946). The book provides some very interesting insights and observations, with lots of graphs and charts. This brief summary contains interesting quotes from the book, as well as questions and reflections for an Australia context.

Initially, in the face of internal and external challenges, the Christian church experienced exponential growth. Yet, after two millennia, the church in the Western world is seeing dramatic disinterest and decline...

*The overall number of practicing Christians is falling, against a cultural backdrop that is increasingly tribal and difficult to define.*

*Significant societal upheavals have led us here. They include the innovative disruptions of the Internet and social media, generational shifts accompanying the coming of age of Millennials and Generation Z, and increasing political rifts between Christian conservatives and progressives. Complicating this turmoil are factors actively tearing at the social fabric: the breakdown of institutions such as the traditional family; the rapidly diversifying racial and ethnic makeup of America; the revelation of sexual aggression and abuse in once-hallowed religious, artistic, academic and political spheres; and highly public violence such as terrorist attacks and mass murders in community spaces. (p 16)*

*Historically, the Christian community has been a source of stability and encouragement in the face of uncertainty and suffering. But today's difficulties are compounded by the fact that practicing Christians are not immune to the destabilization felt so widely. Christians in America are fewer and less unified than at any time in recent memory—and few show signs of knowing what comes next.*

### What are the destabilising issues affecting the church in Australia?

The outcome of years of the Christian faith as being seen as irrelevant, politically corrupt or morally hypocritical is that many in their 20's feeling little cultural pressure to maintain a faith identity. It seems as though what was originally considered to be *good news*, what we call the Gospel, is no longer understood as good news?

Could it be that we have lost what the 'good news' actually is?

### What do you understand is the 'good news' of the Gospel? How would you express that in language the speaks to younger people today?

Barna's research identifies three emerging realities that are impacting the 'effectiveness' of evangelism...

1. **Evangelism Erosion:** *The forces of cultural and religious change are eroding the landscape of evangelism.*
2. **Blurred Maps:** *Christians' perceptions of the landscape and of themselves are often hazy or wide of the mark.*
3. **Fertile Soil:** *Real opportunities remain for evangelism, but effective faith-sharing today looks different from the past. (p 18)*

## Evangelism Erosion

The stark reality of the culture in which we currently live, is that it is now 'post-Christian'. Our culture more closely resembles that of the early church than it does of the church of the 50's and 60's when most people attended church, and Christian beliefs shaped many of society's values. Today, with the influence of religious and social pluralism many of the qualities traditionally associated with the church and its teaching; "*community, personal transformation, social transformation, purpose finding, creativity and accountability*" (p 24) are now found in other groups and associations. "*Millennials especially, are looking to CrossFit and similar groups to play the role traditionally reserved for religious community*" p 24).

Three key trends appear to be emerging that demonstrate this erosion...

- *America is "de-churching" and increasingly isolated.*
- *Most people do not feel a "God-shaped hole."*
- *Cultural fragmentation complicates evangelism. (p 24)*

## Is this your experience in the Australian context?

### How do you respond to people who no longer feel 'a God'shaped hole' in their lives?

*De-churching.* While church involvement has declined, few faith alternatives have arisen. Some have turned to online, or digital, communities – but the "community aspects of a local church are not sufficiently replicated online" (p 30). This actually has a negative impact on community as a whole. "Barna found that young adults who are most committed to practicing their faith today also tend to be more relationally well-rounded" (p 30).

*A God-shaped hole?* While some 76% of practicing Christians saw themselves on a quest for spiritual truth, 77% of lapsed Christians and 72% of religiously unaffiliated said no. In other words, it could be said that when a person becomes a 'lapsed Christian' they have effectively been 'inoculated' to the Christian faith. That doesn't mean that they have abandoned spiritual principles. Their spiritual hunger is simply called by another name.

*When asked to describe activities they consider part of practicing their faith or spirituality, non-Christians give a range of responses. Here is a sampling of their answers:*

- *Cycling*
- *Fishing*
- *Gardening*
- *Sex*
- *Marijuana*
- *Volleyball*
- *Prayer*

- *Being kind and decent*
- *Being good and charitable*
- *Bible reading*
- *Bird watching*
- *Charity*
- *Walking outdoors*
- *Reading and discussing spiritual books*
- *Hospice volunteering (p 31)*

Barna suspects that this is due to what he calls *secularising the sacred*.

*“Longings and practices that have historically been spiritual are increasingly discussed in terms that are not spiritual. For many people, for example, “meditation” has become “mindfulness”—placing what was once a spiritual practice into the category of mental awareness. To borrow a consumer term, a church is no longer the only storefront on the block selling purpose, relational connection and a sense of belonging.” (p 33-34)*

*Complexity of Evangelism.* Today, faith-sharing today needs to begin with the assumption that we are not responding to a ‘god-shaped hole’. There is now no one single recipe or ‘programme’ that will compel a non-Christian to consider the relevance of the gospel.

What stands out for you?

### **Blurred Maps**

*The research shows a dissonance between Christians’ perceptions of effective evangelism and the experience of those who do not practice Christianity. Further, there seem to be gaps in key Christian relational skills and habits that are necessary for evangelism. (p 43)*

What do you think would be the key relational skills and habits necessary for evangelism?

Evangelism is not an optional extra to the Christian faith. While some might be called to be evangelists (and have an extraordinary gift in that regard), evangelism, the sharing of the implications of the good news of Jesus death on the cross is always happening. Evangelism begins in the home – in how we live the gospel to our family. And evangelism extends beyond the home – in how we live the gospel to our friends and colleagues.

Some Millennials are unsure about evangelism. They are strongly aware of the negative light that society casts on proselytization. *Millennials believe that people today are more likely than in the past to take offense if they share their faith (65%)—that’s far higher than among Boomer Christians (28%).* (p 48) A starting point, therefore, is to first help younger Christians understand the importance of evangelism.

However, being aware of the importance of sharing the good news, does not equate to having the conversational and relational skills to engage in evangelism. This is seen in the way Christians understand evangelism, and how non Christians and lapsed Christians are most likely to be open to faith conversations.

*Comparing non-Christians' and lapsed Christians' responses to two different questions reveals the second stark disparity: the qualities of "someone I would talk to about faith" versus the qualities of "Christians I know" (see p. 45). Compared to the majority who says they prefer a conversation partner who listens without judgment and a does not force a conclusion, far smaller proportions say those are qualities possessed by Christians they know (34% and 26%, respectively).*

How do you feel about the statement that 'most non-Christians value just two qualities in a Christian conversation partner: listening without judgment and not forcing a conclusion'?

A further consideration is that of cultural change. Millennials and Gen Z teens are no longer asking questions about heaven.

*How older Christians explain the gospel often attempts to answer questions Millennials and teens just aren't asking. Previous generations asked questions like "How do I get to heaven?" or "What do I do with my guilt?" while younger generations ask entirely different questions, like "What does it mean for me to thrive as a human being?" (p 50)*

And there is a shift from guilt/innocence culture to a shame/honor culture. This is a very important distinction we need to learn.

*Western culture is slowly making a shift from a guilt-and-innocence culture to a shame-and-honor culture. The difference between shame and guilt is subtle yet profound. If you make a mistake in a guilt culture, it's just that: a mistake. If you make a mistake in a shame culture, you are the mistake. A shame culture asks different questions from a guilt culture— and the gospel speaks differently to a shame culture than it does to a guilt culture. Teens and young adults are asking where they belong, how they are significant, how to deal with anxiety, what to do with their loneliness. (p 51)*

What might that look like, for example, when talking about sin?

*If the young are increasingly shaped by a shame culture, then when we talk about sin and how God hates it, we inadvertently communicate that they are unwanted or rejected by God. This could not be further from the truth. It's important that we reframe sin for this generation in a way that is theologically correct, but also that proactively communicates God's love for people. God hates sin because he loves us so much that he can't stand to see us finding "life" where there is no life. This explanation provokes the question from someone who hears it: "If there is no life in the things I do, then where is there life?" That's a good-news question, and it flies with young people. (p 52)*

If we are serious about reaching new generations, what language, do you think, currently impedes? What other ways could the essential truths of the Christian message be said?

Two further key factors influence 'gospel' receptivity. Personal virtues of Christians are not as important to non-Christians as what many Christian people imagine. What is important to non-Christians are "for credible, reasonable explanations of the Christian faith, to see elements of proof for its claims (44%)" (p 55) (this does not equate to traditional apologetics). The second stumbling block is the tarnished reputation of the Christian church; "about one-third of non-Christians (34%) and one

*in five lapsed Christians (21%). Those who want to give others an opportunity to connect with Jesus struggle uphill against the weight of a Christianity perceived as beholden to political power, hypocritical on issues of sexual integrity and as a system that protects troubling public figures.” (p 55)*

It is the Holy Spirit who works faith in people. However, *“it appears non-Christians look most favorably on approaches that spark sincere, friendly engagement.” (p 60)*

What do you understand to be ‘reasonable explanations of the Christian faith’?

What are some ways that the reputation of ‘the church’ can be addressed?

## **Fertile Soil**

Despite the research findings, we follow a God who brings to life dry bones. In many respects, this report is an invitation to listen to where God is inviting us to partner with him in sharing the good news. But...

*...flourishing in change requires adaptation. If American Christians can respond with agility to today’s challenges while retaining their core distinctiveness and message, the gospel will take root, no matter the culture’s trajectory. But if hard realities are ignored, it’s difficult to imagine evangelistic success in a culture no longer inclined to see faith as compelling or relevant. (p 65)*

The final chapter of the book identifies some key skills necessary in order to revitalise evangelism.

First, we need to move beyond ourselves. *“There is no impact without contact” (p 74).*

Second, we need to develop strong relational skills. *“There is no information without real conversation” (p 75)*

Third. We need to be able to have those conversations, in a non-judgmental way, without feeling the need to do the ‘hard sell’, and engage with people in the space of their own (unarticulated) spiritual expressions.

*Spiritual hunger is not static— and Christians can help it grow. The data indicates that spiritual hunger varies among non-Christians in part depending on the Christians they know. When non-Christians have experienced vibrancy, personal care, intelligence, reasonableness and a gentle, non-judgmental approach from Christians, their spiritual curiosity overall and their interest in Christianity specifically are elevated.*

*This implies that spiritual hunger has a social element. We all play a part in encouraging or depressing the spiritual hunger of our neighbors. (p 82)*

## **Headwinds and Tailwinds**

Reviving Evangelism concludes with a list of hindrances and helps to evangelism.

*Headwinds*

*Secular Rising*

*The increasing secular environment includes more religiously unaffiliated adults, especially among Millennials and Gen Z. Relatedly, we see a “secularizing the sacred” trend, which means religious language and meaning are being yanked from their sacred roots and grafted onto secular pursuits.*

### *Belief in the Self*

*The vast majority of adults believes you find “truth” by looking inside yourself. In other words, people are shifting from external sources of authority—such as the Bible, the truth claims of Jesus and so on—to internal sources of authority.*

### *Stay in Your Lane*

*More than four out of five Americans say one shouldn't criticize the life choices of others. So spiritual conversations—like telling someone they are in desperate, existential need of a Savior—face stiffer-than-ever social pressure not to offend.*

### *Conversion = Extremism*

*In a lot of ways, attitudes toward Christianity are moving from being perceived as merely irrelevant to being viewed as extremist. For instance, three out of five adults (and 83% of non-Christians) believe trying to convert another person to their own faith is an example of religious extremism.*

### *Bad Religion*

*Negative perceptions of Christianity are more entrenched in the general population— especially among non-Christians, and even more so among young non-Christians. Whether it's science vs. faith, a badly articulated position on sexuality or fallout from sex and abuse scandals, non-Christians can take their pick of reasons to write off the faith.*

### *Skepticism of Sincerity*

*In the post-truth age, people are increasingly skeptical of sincerity and of certainty. Claims of fake news, spin and gloss make it harder to communicate heart to heart. Being earnest—really, really trying to convey a message from our deepest convictions—generates suspicion and, ironically, seems to lack credibility and authenticity.*

### *Outsourcing Evangelism*

*Increasing numbers of Christians believe it is the responsibility of the local church—not their own job—to do the work of faith-sharing. In other words, the heavy lifting of spiritual conversations is being outsourced.*

### *Conversational Barriers*

*Evangelicals have the highest self-reported levels of conversational barriers; that is, they struggle to have natural and normal conversations with people who are very different from themselves. Christians who are committed to sharing the good news of Jesus ought to be good at these kinds of conversations.*

### *Not-So-Great Commission?*

*One of Barna's most surprising findings of recent years is the fact that 51% of Christian churchgoers say they have never heard of the concept of the Great Commission, reflecting a huge gap in awareness of one of the fundamental callings of every Christian: to make disciples.*

### *Tailwinds*

#### *Radical Transparency*

*In Barna's early years, we had to tread carefully on what we asked and how we asked it. Sexuality was off limits. Queries on religion were subject to the “halo effect,” as respondents often presented themselves as “Christian” and “religious.” No more. Those social pressures are diminishing, revealing candid talk and a radically transparent landscape.*

### *The Search for New Models*

*The current climate of skepticism—even among Christians—is forcing a hard look at what it takes to be effective at sharing the good news of Jesus. False notions of evangelistic impact are coming under greater scrutiny, which seems to spur fresh consideration of new (and not so new) models of evangelism.*

### *Cultivating a New Mentality*

*Bringing people to the gospel requires a new mentality on the part of evangelists: that we are guides and conduits through which a sovereign God does his work. This means we can't assume things about what others are thinking or ram people through our well-worn frameworks.*

### *The Digital World Opens Doors*

*The swift changes brought on by the screen age are changing many aspects of human experience—including how and when we talk about faith. This is opening up literal new domains of spiritual conversation.*

### *Relearning Conversation*

*Speaking of . . . never has listening come at such a premium. Everybody has something to say, and the means to instantly say it to the entire world. But who is listening? Those who relearn the sacred art of give-and-take conversation will gain a hearing.*

### *Hospitality as Generosity*

*It is easier than ever to connect to someone's online profile, but that's no match for connecting with someone. Making space for others IRL ("in real life") is increasingly seen as radically generous and countercultural.*

### *Belief Is Multifaceted*

*It seems like every week there's a new revelation of what brain science is learning about how and why humans believe—and how and why we want to believe. Never before have we understood so much about how faith happens. Due in part to how we're wired, sacred and spiritual experiences—not just information and explanation—are vital parts of the evangelism process.*

### *Longing for Community*

*People are so isolated. Millennials often feel empty and rejected. Many seek a place to belong based on an activity (like CrossFit) or an interest (like anime). But those bonds aren't strong enough to nurture and sustain a multifaceted human being created in God's image.*

### *Season of Reckoning*

*Long-hidden systemic sins such as racism, misogyny, sexual abuse and financial exploitation are being brought into the light, and many churches are taking meaningful (and often painful) steps to repent and to heal the wounds.*

### *Culture at the Crossroads*

*In our research in Europe and elsewhere in the post-Christian West, Barna keeps finding evidence of faith that's flourishing in unexpected places. Breakneck culture change is causing many people to reconsider life in Christ. (p 88-91)*