

We looked at many different reports and surveys looking at Millennial attitudes to religion.<sup>1</sup> We relied most heavily on four major research efforts: the Religious Landscape Study produced by the Pew Research Center (in 2007 and in 2014); the Baylor Religion Survey (2007-2011); the PRRI/RNS September 2016 Survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute; and the Gallup Annual Religion Surveys (1992-2016).

Not surprisingly, each used slightly different methodologies and asked different questions. Based on those primary data sources, we built out religious switching scenarios for the next 30 years, based on the most up-to-date switching, trend and attitudinal data, and harmonizing assumptions across primary data sources. For a detailed review of the assumptions behind the model, please see the explanation at the end of this chapter.

Our projections are based on modeling techniques akin to what one might use in a professional context for market forecasts. They are certain to diverge over time from reality, and we have called out our assumptions wherever we can.<sup>2</sup> Our purpose is to identify directional trends and orders of magnitude, and we believe them to be useful for understanding the scope of the challenge, if not the exact number.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on our research sources, please see the bibliography section at the end of this report.

<sup>2</sup> The models are available for download at [www.americanchurch2050.org](http://www.americanchurch2050.org).



## I. Base Case Scenario

Our base case scenario is sobering. By using the switching rates described at the end of this chapter, we arrived at a conservative estimate of how we think the future will play out if things continue as they are.

What is remarkable about this picture is that the growth in the unaffiliated is almost entirely due to religious switching. The birth rate of the unaffiliated is substantially lower than other populations, at 1.7, and considerably lower than the replacement rate of 2.1. Unlike the religious populations, the unaffiliated are not growing by births. We found that over half of all people who switch affiliation over the next 30 years land in the unaffiliated. Furthermore, since the unaffiliated have the highest retention rates of any religious affiliation, they are likely to stay.

We found that Catholics and Evangelicals are near equal contributors to the decline; Catholics due to higher attrition, and Evangelicals due to accelerating attrition and a larger starting population. We found that mainlines decline, but not as much as one might think, due primarily to Evangelicals switching into mainline denominations. Also, Catholics do not decline as an overall percentage nearly as much as we would expect due to high levels of immigration (nearly three times larger than Evangelical rates). While Evangelicals decline, they still retain a large final share of the population, due primarily to the large switch in rates from Catholics, mainline, and unaffiliated, as well as higher fertility.

In addition to the base case scenario, we also projected out worse case and better case scenarios. We believe these outline a range of possible outcomes and help define the potential ground to be won, or lost, by improving retention rates within the church.

By the year 2050:

### 35 million

youths raised in Christian homes will disaffiliate from Christianity, which is over one million per year.

### 73% to 59%

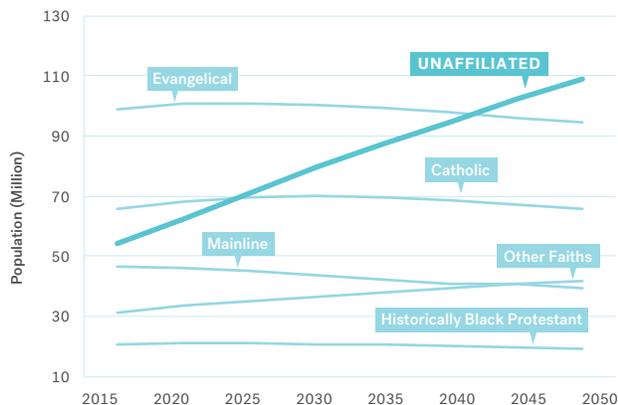
The overall Christian percentage of the population will drop to 59 percent, from today's 73 percent.

### 50 million

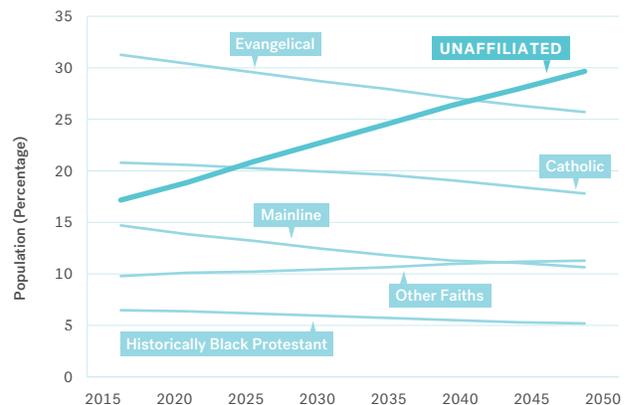
The unaffiliated population will nearly double as a percentage of the U.S. population, from 17 percent today to 30 percent in 2050, an increase of more than 50 million people.

### BASE CASE WITH PROJECTED GEN Z SWITCHING RATES

Religious Demographic Growth to 2050



Religious Demographic Growth to 2050, by Percentage



Within this worse case, but by no means the worst case scenario, the impact by 2050 is this:

## 42 million

youths raised in Christian homes will disaffiliate from Christianity, which is ~1.4 million per year.

## 74%-54%

The overall Christian percentage of the population will drop to 54 percent, from today's 73 percent.

## 70 million

The unaffiliated population will more than double as a percentage of the U.S. population, from 17 percent today to 35 percent in 2050, an increase of more than 70 million people.

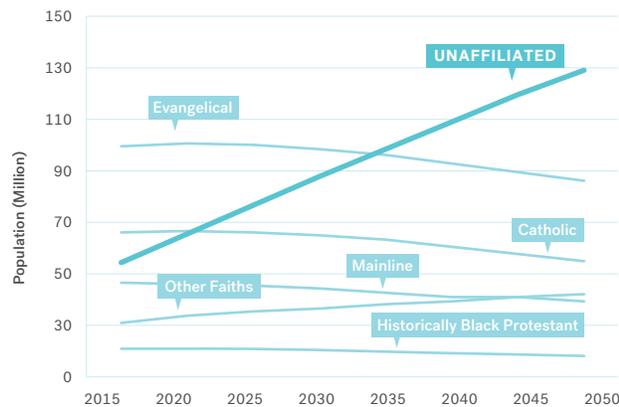
## II. Worse Case Scenario

In this more aggressive scenario, we assumed that all Christian switching rates to the unaffiliated will mirror the mainline switching rate of 38 percent.

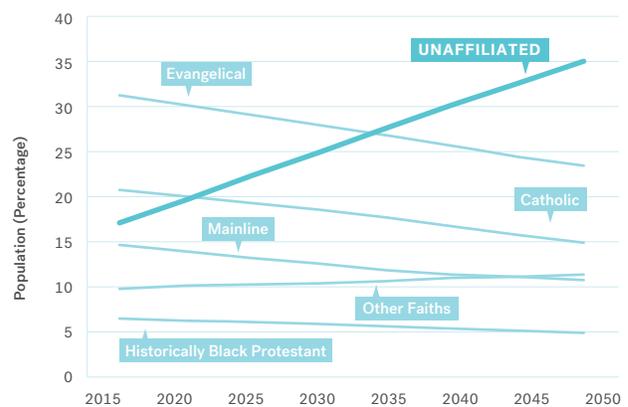
Additionally, in this scenario immigration patterns change such that Catholic immigration decreases from 35 percent of yearly immigrants to 18 percent, and unaffiliated increase from 23 percent to 40 percent. In effect, this scenario forecasts a future where Christian populations do even less to form their youth.

### WORSE CASE: ALL CHRISTIAN SECTS FOLLOW MAINLINE ATTRITION RATES

Religious Demographic Growth to 2050



Religious Demographic Growth to 2050, by Percentage





Within this better case scenario the picture is this by the year 2050:

## 26 million

youths raised in Christian homes will disaffiliate from Christianity, which is ~800,000 per year.

## 9 million

youth will remain within the faith instead of leaving, compared to our base case scenario, and 7 million youth raised in unaffiliated homes will switch into the church: a swing of 16 million youth.

## 73% to 66%

The overall Christian percentage of the population will drop much less, to 66 percent, from today's 73 percent.

## 35 million

The unaffiliated population will start leveling off at approximately 24 percent of the population, from 17 percent today, an increase of 35 million people.

### III. Better Case Scenario

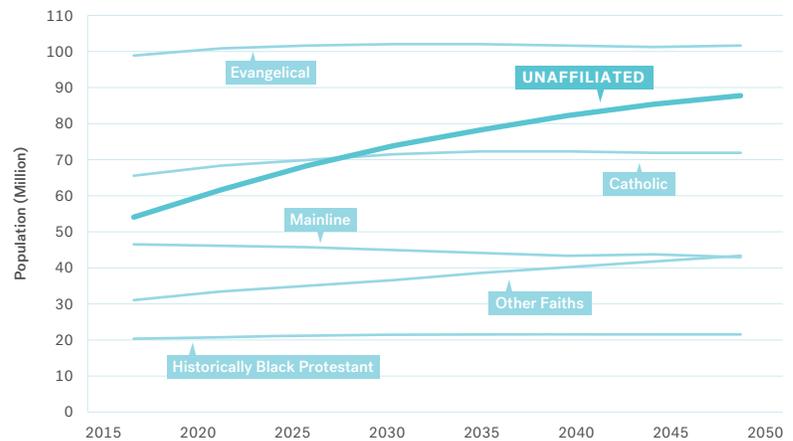
In our better case scenario, we assume attrition rates return to what they were a generation ago, with Gen X.

This means that overall Christian attrition to the unaffiliated is reduced by about one third, returning to an average of ~20 percent attrition to the unaffiliated rather than 30 percent.<sup>3</sup> The result of these changes is a very different picture than the base case. Additionally, Evangelicals are still the majority religious group and the unaffiliated have begun to level off at around 24 percent of the population. We think even better scenarios can be imagined, but that this scenario is optimistically within reach.

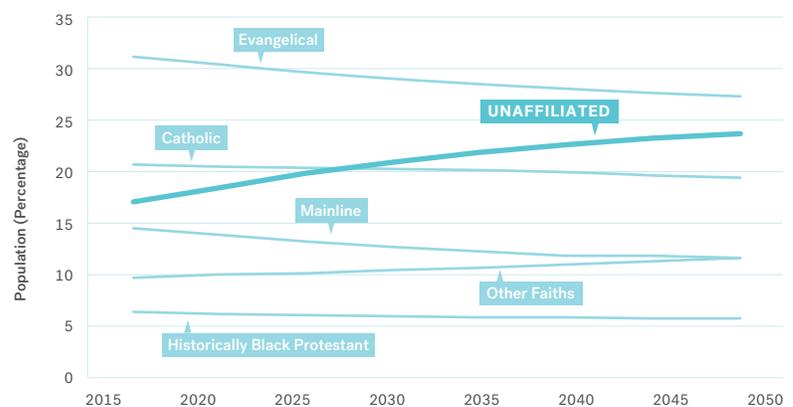
<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Evangelical attrition to unaffiliated returns to 18 percent, Catholic returns to 23 percent, mainline returns to 26 percent, and Historically Black Protestant attrition rates return to 12 percent. Additionally, unaffiliated attrition rates to Christianity return to Gen X levels, at 48 percent, instead of 22 percent.

#### BETTER CASE: RETURN TO GEN X RATES

Religious Demographic Growth to 2050



Religious Demographic Growth to 2050, by Percentage



## What should we make of all of these projections?

It is worth noting that all Christians in America still comprise the majority (54 percent) of the religious affiliation in our base case. Even in our worst case Christians are still the dominant religious affiliation. We will not be a secular Europe with empty churches on every corner. However, a shift from over seven out of ten people in America self-identifying as Christian to five out of ten is a very large cultural change. It will *feel very different* (and already does to many!) when nearly half of Americans are not Christian. But it is not as if Christians will be an insignificant, irrelevant fringe in America. Our ability and resources to do the mission of the church will be large, and the American church will still be in a far more privileged position than most churches around the world.

Nonetheless, the base case scenario represents a profound shift: 1,000,000 young people every year—children who were in our Sunday schools, our youth groups, our confirmation classes, our missions trips—are saying that Christ is no longer He with whom they choose to identify.

To put that number in context, it is larger to dramatically larger than the number of abortions that occur every year in America.<sup>4</sup> The discussion of the sanctity of life is an important one in our society, and many Evangelicals and Catholics have been willing to pay very high political and cultural costs to protect the unborn through advocacy in the political and legal arenas. The loss of our youth is even larger and fraught with deep theological and eternal consequence. We cannot say with certainty what happens to the unborn when their life ends, but scripture is clear as to what happens to those who knew of Jesus and chose to live their lives apart from Him. God desires that all might be saved!

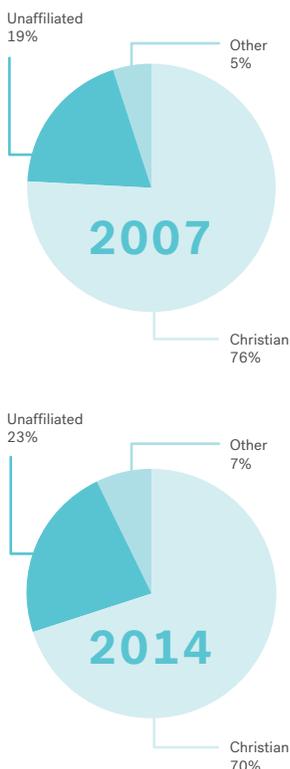
More to the point, the question of the loss of our next generations of Christians is one that does not require so high a cost in the political realm, though it may require more of our effort. It does not require intervening outside of our church. *We do not need policy change to disciple our youth. We do not need judicial appointees to introduce them to the person of Jesus. We do not need voter guides to invite them into God's great mission.* And arguably, this is the central work of the church on the earth.

---

<sup>4</sup> The base case unaffiliated is larger than both the Guttmacher Institute number in 2015 of 926,000 abortions, and over 50 percent larger than the CDC reported numbers.

One objection we have heard is that the youth will return after their 20s when they have children and form families. If this were true, we would have expected to see this in the Gen X population, as the youngest are now nearly 40. However, disaffiliation for Gen X has increased by 4 percent over the last seven years (see figure 8). Whatever return to the church that may happen during family formation is being more than offset by departures.

**GROWTH OF UNAFFILIATED, GENERATION X (BORN 1965-1980)**



Source: Pew Research 2014 Religious Landscape Study

## This is the largest evangelization opportunity in the history of our country. We have less than 35 years, and the clock is ticking.

Equally, it is unlikely without a major move of God that the U.S. will return to the rates of Christian affiliation we saw 50 years ago. In our best case, the unaffiliated are still 24 percent of the U.S. population and likely to increase further. That is important, because it changes the posture of the church. We must engage in a culture that has a substantial portion of its people who either no longer think the church is relevant to them, or increasingly, are ignorant of Christian context and language. The unaffiliated have the highest rates of retention for any religious group, and we think this, if unchanged, will create a permanent segment of people who have no exposure to the church as a normal course of affairs. Biblical allusions will be lost upon them; moral and ethical reasoning will be founded on shifting cultural norms.

We should also point out one incredibly important, but perhaps obvious point. There is a high degree of urgency to this problem. As we describe at the end of this chapter, we use the assumption that the majority of religious switching takes place by age 25 and religious preference remains constant after age 35. This means that the majority of religious switching in the Millennial generation has already taken place, and the oldest Millennials, now 37, have exited the switching window entirely. Gen Z, which is a larger cohort than Millennials (who were themselves the largest generation in American history), has now started entering the switching window. They will start exiting the window in just 13 years, and most of Gen Z will have left the window by 2050.

This is the largest evangelization opportunity in the history of our country. We have less than 35 years, and the clock is ticking.

## Does this even matter?

In some of our conversations, the point was raised that frankly the American church could do with some pruning to recover greater fidelity. That may or may not be—God knows, we do not know. But we do not think that as Christians we should comfort ourselves by saying that losing the next generation improves the quality of our faith. A contracting church is very unlikely to be a fruitful church.

Many of the great leaders in American church history—Edwards, Whitefield, Wesley, Asbury, Allen, Seymour, Graham—saw the church’s fidelity increase precisely because it was concerned with reaching the lost, usually starting with the youth. Evangelicals are so named because they are concerned with sharing the good news with those who have not yet heard it.

We are hard pressed to understand a theology that does not take centrally the importance of the missional work of the church. Certainly, church practices of confession, prayer, scriptural study, and others are critically necessary. Equally as important is the necessity of missional outreach.

We would also contend that it would be a great loss to the world if the American church failed to steward its domestic mandate well. The American church has been the largest contributor to world missions and biblical translation in recent history – certainly for the last 150 years. The resources and wealth of the U.S. church are remarkable; they are among the largest contributors to aid and support in the world today outside of governments and international agencies. American church leaders have led major efforts in issues of justice. American theologians have made significant and unique contributions to doctrine, particularly in the relationship of religion and public life. To see these contributions diminish greatly in our generation would be a tragedy.

So where do we go from here? Christians are called to be a hopeful people, and we are hopeful for the future of the American church. We believe that with focused effort on the part of funders, church leaders, and ultimately Christians in America, we can move forward into a future that sees our churches thrive.