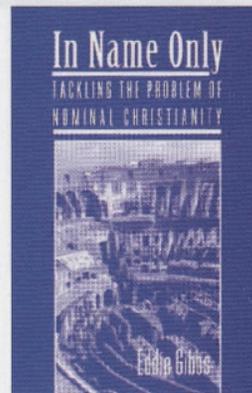


When “nominal” Christians want only the label

12 years after his initial challenge, Eddie Gibbs calls churches to greater discipling and says it’s time for a “second reformation.”



Occasionally a book captures the imagination and interest, or penetrates some aspect of faith and practice, that puts it on a preferred shelf for frequent reference. Such a book is Eddie Gibbs’ *In Name Only: Tackling the Problem of Nominal Christianity*, first published in 1994 and reissued by Fuller Seminary Press in 2005.

Nominality is when people embrace the social cachet of wanting the label of being called Christian but without taking on the liabilities and responsibilities that accompany it, Gibbs says

Even as churches work on discipleship and spiritual formation, and give a title to a staff member in those areas, aimed at bringing the nominal Christian into deeper communion and commitment to Christ and the church, Gibbs says such programs tend to be elitist and marginal, representing “a second level for those who are really serious about their faith instead of being foundational to the life of the faith community.”

One notable example of this approach is Community Church of Joy (ELCA) in Glendale, AZ, he says, where that church is emphasizing discipleship as the development of life-skills throughout the congregation, calling it not a program but rather “the hard drive” of the church — its very operating system.

Dr. Gibbs is Donald A. McGavran Professor of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. *Church Executive* asked Dr. Gibbs how he looks at the church and nominality 12 years later.

Since you wrote *In Name Only*, what has changed in the “nominality syndrome” since then? Are matters better?

In some ways *In Name Only* was ahead of its time in that I constantly had to explain what I meant by nominality! It is all too easy to “hide” in a large church. There is little evidence of life transformation in those attendees who live at a distance from their church and are not involved beyond the weekend worship services. In such situations an emphasis on discipleship is a hard sell. One megachurch pastor I know with a membership of 10,000 began to emphasize discipleship and to switch the emphasis from “megachurch” to “missional church.” In so doing he lost 1,000 consumer Christians.

Your book suggests strategies to help the church confront nominality within its own ranks and to “winning back the multitudes which have already voted with their feet by swelling the ranks of the lapsed and the notional ‘believers.’” Are any of these strategies working? >>

When “nominal” Christians want only the label

Our emphasis on “making disciples” has tended to focus on one-on-one discipleship or on elitist programs. These have clearly had a profound impact in the lives of many individuals who have gone on to leadership positions in their churches and church agencies. Many have also continued as mentors to younger Christians, leading them to spiritual maturity. But these initiatives have not impacted the DNA of the churches as a whole.

One significant development to have emerged during the past decade consists of initiatives taken usually, but not exclusively, by younger Christians, who have become increasingly dissatisfied with a “consumer” model of the church, which has been subverted by a materialistic culture and that also creates a separation between the sacred and the secular. They regard these trends as the heresies of modernity. They are currently seeking fresh expressions of church that emphasize living out the gospel of the reign of God as demonstrated and taught by Jesus; that church is much more than a weekly gathering but a community that defines one’s primary identity; that worship is something in which we all contribute creatively; and that our understanding of ministry is for the world rather than mainly confined within the church.

As megachurches spring up on the religious landscape, what are the dangers of nominality for them in their second and third generational life spans?

Most churches find leadership transitions difficult, but within megachurches they can be traumatic. This is because they have grown around the vision, personality and giftedness of the founding pastor. Most members have come from elsewhere and have high expectations. When the founding pastor moves on, then the movement can degenerate into a monument that lives off its past reputation, or people may simply move to another megachurch as inactive consumers.

No church can afford to live off its reputation. Each generation needs a fresh experience of God and a renewed commitment to mission in recognition that the culture is changing and that priorities shift.

A further problem arises for young people who have grown up within that congregation and begin to feel culturally alienated from its “boomer” me-centered ethos. Some react against “celebrity” focused religion and staged performances, craving community, authenticity and involvement.

What should churches like Willow Creek and Saddleback look for as they enter their third and fourth decades? What kind of course corrections should they be taking?

The average age of congregations tend to climb as their

leader ages. So it is important to bring younger leaders in to the team and to give them a high profile. They must also be sensitive to the culture shift from one generation to the next. As we age we tend to think that the next generation will be like our own despite the fact that we are acutely aware of the difference that older generations present.

EDDIE GIBBS: SPEAKING AND WRITING

Presenter, Jan. 4-6, 2007, St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, Mt. Pleasant, SC. Conference on “Developing Communities in a Post Modern Culture,” a series of four lectures. Go to www.samp.cc

Presenter, Jan. 22-24, 2007, Robert Harold Schuller Forum for Possibility Thinking Leadership, Crystal Cathedral, Garden Grove, CA. Bringing together classical, contemporary and emerging churches and leaders. Go to www.crystalcathedral.org/faithforward.

Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures (Baker Academic, 2005), with co-author Ryan Bolger.

LeadershipNext: Changing Leaders in a Changing Culture (InterVarsity Press, 2005).

Some of the megachurch leaders are aware of this challenge and are adopting decentralized strategies with community-based congregations. They are developing congregations that have a cultural fit with the world in which younger people have grown up. However, there is still a tendency to regard those alternative congregations as temporary “holding tanks” until the youth mature to the point of getting married and having families. By which time they will be ready for “real church.” In my view, this is a mistaken strategy.

What should be their strategies to avoid the danger of nominality setting in?

Leaders must recognize that evangelization can no longer be understood in terms of “decisionism” or revivalism, but as the first steps in a lifetime of learning what it entails to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Second, the church must be outwardly focused, and understand-

ing its mission as being one of going into the world and not simply inviting people to church (on our terms and where we are in control). Third, we need a new kind of leadership that understands the urgent missional challenge that is facing the church in North America at the present time. In addition to pastors and teachers we need a new breed of pioneering, risk-taking leadership. This is especially urgent in the case of the historic denominations.

When a church’s senior staff gathers for their weekly meet-

ing, what is the “guerrilla in the room” regarding the nominality syndrome for that church?

The “guerrilla in the room” is most likely the long-standing board member who has achieved his or her position of prominence as guardian of tradition and as the voice of the traditional members of the church. They are institutionally committed without that commitment translating into an allegiance to Christ and his mission in the world. Furthermore “the guerrilla” may represent a major financial contributor!

You mention the example of Joshua and the history of Israel as one generation died out and the next generation forgot the Lord and what he had done for Israel. What should we learn from this?

The main lesson to learn is that no church can afford to live off its reputation. Each generation needs a fresh experience of God and a renewed commitment to mission in recognition that the culture is changing and that priorities shift. As far as the U.S. is concerned, we are moving out of a Christendom context, in which the church is recognized as a central institution and establishes our mores and shapes our future. The church is increasingly marginalized and has to learn to operate with grace and boldness from the margins — much like the church in the first two centuries of its existence. Also, the church must learn how to address the pluralism and relativism of our culture from the standpoint of informed, critical engagement rather than strident confrontation, usually from a safe distance.

What can churches do to win people back?

My assessment is that our ministry structures are still far too self-serving, designed to ensure the institutional survival of the church. For instance, evangelization is envisioned as inviting people to church, and our service in the community has a “bait-and-switch” hidden agenda. True love does not lay down conditions, and has the well-being of those we seek to serve in mind. A truly incarnational commitment means an immersion in the surrounding culture, while retaining our distinctiveness as followers of Christ. Church structures cannot be imported like some imported kit of pre-cut pieces to be assembled on site, but must be birthed within the culture.

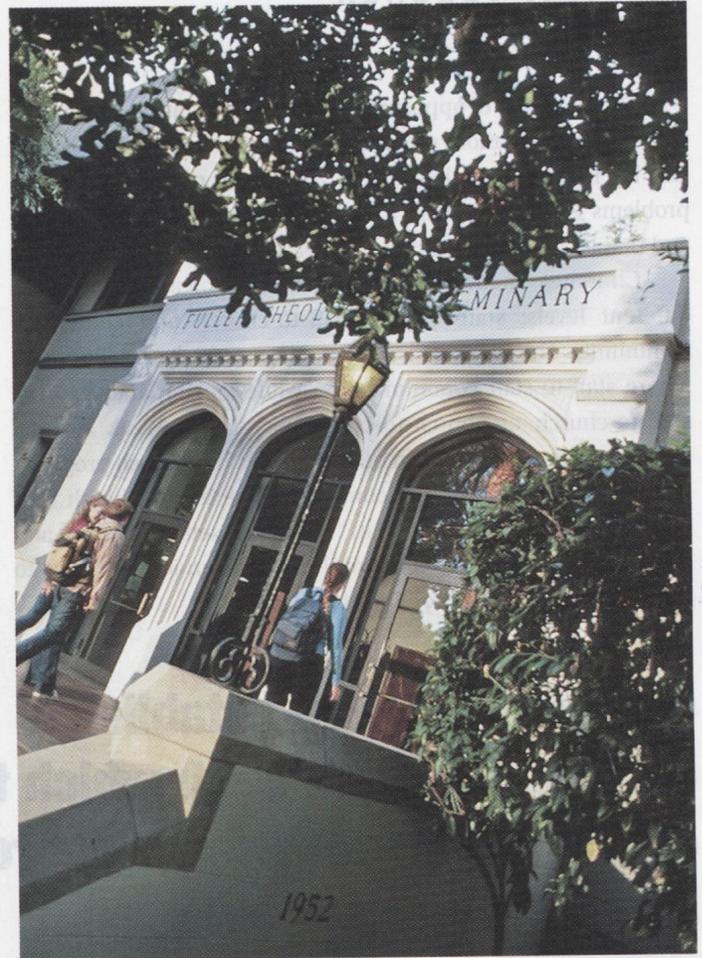
Where are the bright spots that you can report on?

There is now a growing recognition at every level of church life that the church must re-envision and re-invent itself in light of the new challenges it’s beginning to face. Leading players in the field are *The Gospel and Our Culture Network* [www.gospel-culture.org.uk], and the emerging churches phenomenon. There are an increasing number of ground level initiatives that are attracting the attention of senior leaders and ecclesiastical gate-keepers. There is a renewed commitment to evangelization, and the *Alpha* program has helped to establish a different approach based on hospitality, dialogue and mutual ministry as seekers help one another to faith in response to the teaching videos with which each session is introduced.

What have you changed your mind on since you wrote the book? Where have you witnessed hope or seen discouragement?

I have come to a greater appreciation of the need for the

church to radically restructure to see itself as God’s agent for the fulfillment of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-22). We have to address the chronic problem of undisciplined church members, for it takes a disciple to make other disciples. We have tended to cut the Great Commission away from the rest of the Gospel, losing sight of the fact that Matthew’s task is to tell first century (mainly Jewish) followers of Christ what was entailed in following him. This needs to be translated into our 21st century cultural contexts. I am hopeful at the growing realization that we need to live according to the gospel. I am discouraged by the fact that this is



often translated into being culturally “conservative” Christians instead of our being radically subversive within our narcissistic and aggressively consumerist culture.

You wrote that the church needs to be *semper reformanda* — always reforming. Has the time come for a “second reformation” in the church?

Yes, I believe it is urgent in response to the calls for fresh expressions of the church, and to the fact that many people of faith are voting with the faith. They may not be leaving churches because they are “nominal” but because they are frustrated by the nominality of the church! George Barna claims that this exodus now numbers 20 million in North America. Church attendance in the United States is not the 40 percent given by marketing surveys, but is more like 18 percent. There is a big gap between what people claim and the action they take.