A nation of people with 'individualized moral menus' will result in chaos

By Matt Friedeman
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Peter Kim and James Patterson assure us their polling data is correct. And if *The Day America Told the Truth* is an accurate picture of our country, then it's pretty sobering reality.

Page after page of chilling news from their book jumps out at the reader. A small sample:

• 91 percent of us lie regularly; one in five of us can't make it through a single day without premeditated deception.

• For $10 million, about one in four of us would abandon all friends, abandon our church or turn to prostitution for a week.

• One in seven Americans has been sexually abused as a child; one in six has been physically abused.

• 17 percent of men have had intercourse with the same sex; 7 percent with an animal.

• 20 percent of this country's women claim to be victims of date rape.

• The United States is, by far, the most violent industrialized nation on the Earth.

• A third of married men and women have had or are now having an affair. Sixty-two percent of those think there's nothing morally askew with the affairs.

• 68 percent of us don't believe that America has a single hero now.

• The 20 sleaziest professions? Americans say drug dealer (No. 1), organized crime boss (No. 2), prostitute (No. 4). That's good news. The bad news: TV evangelist (No. 3); local politician (No. 6); Congressmen (No. 7).

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You like depression? Run out and buy this book. There's lots more. The second chapter reveals all, in my estimation. According to the authors, we have become a nation of people with "highly individualized moral menus." One obvious example: Only 13 percent of Americans believe in the Ten Commandments.

The rest of us are making up our own.

Some of these include "I will steal from those who won't really miss it" (74 percent concur); "I will lie when it suits me, so long as it doesn't cause any real damage" (64 percent); "I will cheat on my spouse—after all, given the chance, he or she will do the same (53 percent); I will cheat on my taxes to a point" (30 percent).

The point is, we decide what is right or wrong. We are the authorities over the church, over God, over the government, over the laws and the police.

"Whose values?" asked a recent *Newsweek* cover story after Vice President Dan Quayle and his Murphy Brown remark put the subject back on the front-burner. The *Newsweek* commentary was frightfully murky, but at least it had the question right. It is an inquiry that demands continual review.

Our Founding Fathers knew that for this nation to survive there must be in place a common moral consensus. Let's be honest: For years, we have defined that moral consensus as the Judeo-Christian ethic.

Basically, that's found in the Bible.

Basically, we have, in recent years, been ignorant of that standard or have laid it conveniently aside.

Basically, we are in big, big trouble.

A generation ago, atheist Bertrand Russell was in debate with philosopher Frederick Copleston. At one point, Copleston pressed an academic point: On what basis did Russell differentiate between right and wrong? Answer: on the same basis I differentiate between blue and yellow.

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Copleston countered that reasoning wasn't viable. While one tells the difference between colors by sight, morality is another matter. So, again the question: How do you differentiate between good and evil? In a beggardly moment, Russell replied that he did so on the basis of **feeling**.

Russell certainly would be proud of our contemporary society. According to Kim and Patterson, a large segment of this country has embraced that kind of "whatever I'm feeling" based morality while trashing any sort of real standard. Russell's principle of ethics has swept the land—truly a tragic trend.

Given the choice, I'll take a country, a state and a city that opts for a standard of the Judeo-Christian variety:

• Where gay-rights, rampant adultery and condom distribution are replaced by monogamous marriage and sexual purity.

• Where honesty and hard work are valued over thievery and making an easy buck (or getting an easy buck because of thievery—see L.A.).

• Where TV and movie theaters display a lot less "R" and "X" and a whole lot more "G."

• Where decisions based on feeling are first tested against the anvil of an understood morality and rock solid standards.

We are the authorities over the church, over God, over the government, over the laws and the police.

It has been said that if you keep the moral law found in Holy Writ and in the fabric of the universe, you and your country can expect heaven. Break that moral law, and you can expect hell—here and now.

Church has great untapped potential for positive impact on society

By Tom Hess
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Pastors and the politically active lay people within their congregations sometimes disagree on how to involve the church in social issues. Each can be suspicious of the other: Some activists think their pastor is afraid of controversy, and some pastors think activists are reckless "lone rangers."

"Many pastors view activists as a threat. They've seen activists who've had a knee-jerk reaction to all issues and embarrassed their church,'' said H.B. London, a pastor for 31 years and now the Assistant to the President for Pastoral Relations for Focus on the Family. "On the other hand, the laity is usually ahead of the pastor in understanding an issue. In most cases, the pastor simply needs to be educated."

For their part, pastors say the key to their support of pro-family activism is trust.

"The truth is, pastors have been burned," said David Hocking, senior pastor of Calvary Church in Santa Ana, California, and author of *The Moral Catastrophe*. "In a church our size, I get all kinds of information half of which isn't true."

Hocking's church draws 6,000 people each Sunday from more than 30 cities in and around Orange County, adjacent to Los Angeles.

"Someone will come to me and say, 'Did you hear what happened in our city?' but there are so many cities in Southern California that it's very important that people give us up-to-date information. Too often, it's been hit-and-miss."

The problem isn't isolated to mega-churches in cities such as Los Angeles.

"Activists can make everything seem like a five-alarm fire," said Steve Strutz, senior pastor of Faith Evangelical Church, a 1,000-member church in Billings, Montana.

The solution, however, is not to put the burden of public policy research and activism on pastoral staff.

"You just don't drop another project on the pastor. The leadership has to come from laity," said Rudy Heintzelman, diaconal minister of programs at Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

How, then, do pastors and activist lay people reconcile their concerns? Independent of each other, Calvary Church in California, Faith Evangelical in Montana and Frazer Memorial in Alabama have created the same solution: Each has established a lay group under pastoral authority that is responsible for providing accurate, timely information on social issues.

Alabama special

Donna McClinton is the stay-at-home mother of three girls, ages 16, 11, and 9. She is also co-chairman of the Family Issues-Concerns Ministry at Frazer Memorial.

"I don't want my children looking at me 20 years from now and asking, 'Why didn't you do something about abortion, about pornography?'" McClinton said.

McClinton first became politically active in the spring of 1988.

"I heard Dr. Dobson on one of his radio broadcasts, talking about the pro-life issue. I was making a bed, and I just prayed a prayer: 'Lord, I don't know what I can do. I'm just one person, but I'm willing to do anything I can to impact our society.'"

The following summer, when Focus on the Family released the anti-pornography film **Fatal Addiction,** McClinton saw an opportunity to mobilize the community.

"I asked the leadership of the church for permission to host a community-wide program and invite the local district attorney and the press to see the film," McClinton said. "More than 200 people attended."

She saw the turnout as an indicator of strong community interest in issues of public morality, and asked Frazer's senior pastor, John Ed Mathison, for permission to launch the Family Issues-Concerns Ministry.

"I told him there was a need for a family concerns ministry to attack other family issues and begin to take the church out of the four walls and into the community. He was fully in favor of that and promoted it churchwide."

Mathison approved the ministry and introduced it from the pulpit. He invited McClinton to address the congregation about the ministry's role within the church and to write an article for the church's monthly newsletter, *Frazer Family News*, which is mailed to 6,000 homes. The ministry has a representative in each of the 30 adult Sunday school classes (total attendance: 1,400) in which they report legislative alerts and other action items.

McClinton co-chairs the public policy group with another layman, Larry Morgan, but responsibility for specific issues is delegated to individuals: Linda Poole on pro-life issues; and Morgan on pornography issues.

Among the projects the family issues group has handled:

• Financial support for a local crisis pregnancy center.

• A petition drive that persuaded local theaters not to exhibit NC-17 films.

• Urged church members to write the Alabama legislature in support of an anti-obscenity bill, which later passed and was signed by the governor.

• Sponsored exhibition of a pro-life film at the Baptist Student Union on the campus of Auburn University-Montgomery.

• Encouraged local pastors to preach about abortion on Sanctity of Life Sunday last January, and helped identify young women who could address Frazer Memorial's congregation about the effects of abortions they experienced.

• Coordinated review of public school textbooks.

• Coordinated local observance of the National Day of Prayer.

Frazer Memorial's leadership is pleased with the work of McClinton's group.

"The thing I most appreciate about Donna is her complete submission to the authority of staff," said Heintzelman, Frazer's diaconal minister. "It builds such a positive relationship between the laity and the staff and a trust factor. I get out of the way and let her do her job."

Montana spark

Meg Burvainis is a banking consultant with the Executive Group in Billings, Montana. One year ago, she helped form Christians in Action (CIA) at Faith Evangelical Church.

"I felt like Christians were starting to lose their salt," Burvainis said. "Ten years ago, we would have been shocked that an aborted child was found in a garbage heap. Today, people turn a deaf ear to the news."

Burvainis got the idea of a Community Impact Committee