

# High Anxiety

by [Clark Cowden](#)

Last month, a writer for Newsweek magazine wrote an editorial about the way the world has changed for many Americans. He quoted a report from the Pew Research Center which states that the overarching economic narrative of the 2008 American presidential campaign is the idea that life for the middle class has grown more difficult. The report finds that four-fifths of Americans find it hard to maintain middle-class lifestyles, as opposed to two-thirds of Americans who felt that way twenty years ago.

The article quoted a book entitled “(Not) Keeping Up With Our Parents”. In this book, the writer says, “When my college-educated, gainfully employed thirty something friends and I get together, we talk about money. We talk about our inadequate health insurance and whether we can afford it, and how to juggle credit card payments and crushing student loans... This wasn’t the life I’d expected.”

People worry about rising living expenses; but what really upsets them is the possibility that their incomes or fringe benefits - pensions, health and disability insurance - might vanish. The share of families suffering a 50 percent loss of income with a spell of unemployment rose from 17 percent in the late 1970s and early 1980s to 26 percent today. Fear of those setbacks has also climbed up the social ladder: not just factory workers and low-paid service employees, but also managers and engineers. Bad economic news packs greater psychological punch than it once did. Change isn’t just something that happens to other people. Now, it can happen to me.

All of this adds together to create high anxiety for a growing number of people. For years, a number of Americans have been shielded from many of the economic difficulties that people in other parts of the world have had to deal with as part of ordinary life. There is a ‘leveling effect’ going on here. Many of the protections that previously existed are breaking down. As we live into this global economy, it is not only the benefits that are experienced worldwide, but also the hardships. Psychologically, many Americans have to deal with the loss, fear, and anxiety they never thought they would have to deal with.

Does the church give people a place where they can talk about the high anxiety they are experiencing? Is the church aware of the psychological panic that a growing number of people today are feeling? And what do we do about it? Do we resort to a message of blessing - if you have faith then God will make you financially rich? Do we open up our homes and extend the gift of hospitality to people who have no one to talk to? Do we look at new ministries that create jobs? Do we ignore the changes and just encourage people to find a way to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps”?

More and more people are experiencing the loss of stability. The world is no longer as predictable as it used to be. There are disasters of all sorts of shapes and sizes that are outside of our control. We can try to build a firewall to keep them out, but we’ll never be completely successful. What does this do to people’s ability to cope? Can we help people learn to adapt?

How does the gospel speak to the high anxiety people have? What does this mean about the issues people will bring with them to church gatherings? What will this do the level of conflict we experience?

These are challenging times we live in. Since we don't have all the answers, it's important that we ask the right questions. We need to re-engage the story of God's people in the scriptures to learn how they handled this. When life moves from certainty to uncertainty, from predictability to unpredictability, from stability to instability, we have to make some tough shifts in the way we view the world and the way we view God. We have to ask the missional questions: what is God doing here? Where is the church being called to join God's mission?

I don't believe the number of people experiencing this high anxiety is going to decrease any time soon. If anything, I think it will increase. How is God calling the church to respond to this situation? Are we in touch with this reality? Are there some doors of ministry that are opening for the church to connect with its community in new ways? What do you think?