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Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People are DONE with Church but Not Their Faith

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Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are DONE with Church but Not Their Faith
By Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope
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Attendance at Christian churches throughout the Western world has been declining dramatically, first in the mainline denominations and more recently in evangelical churches, too. Since 1977, the Gallop organization has been asking Americans to rate the honesty and ethical standards of people's professions. "In 2013 the clergy received its lowest score ever. The number of people who believe clergy has very high or high levels of honesty and ethical standards fell below 50 percent for the first time" (17), a rating that has been falling ever since 1985 when a high of 67 percent was recorded. In fact, being a pastor now means that people are inclined to distrust them. One pastor quoted here said, "As a pastor and staff, we approach every day with the understanding that we need to focus on earning that trust back. It can never be assumed" (17).

Christian leaders *are* concerned. We're being inundated with books like *unChristian* (Kinnaman and Lyons), *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore* (Schultz and Schultz), *Generation ExChristian* (Dyck), *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Chaves), and most recently, *Churchless* (Barna and Kinnaman) in 2014, which says that the unchurched represents one-third of the population, a portion being mature Christians who are choosing to leave church. These "dechurched" are not angry or mad; they're just uninterested. Their leaving "simply reflects the firsthand experiences that led them to conclude churches are ill-equipped to support the flourishing life they hope for" (20). As Barna and Kinnaman say, "we must admit the possibility that our churches are somehow enabling many people to stall out on their journey toward deep, transformative faith" (20).

This book, *Church Refugees*, looks more in depth at this category it calls the "dechurched." In general, they are highly educated, church doers who have held leadership positions in an average of four churches, leading at all levels. So the dechurched may "not only contribute to the decline in religious affiliation and in worship attendance, but they may also be driving forces behind these trends" (21). When they eventually leave, they speak of doing it for their spiritual survival and to flee the spiritual abuse. They don't give up on God. They simply give up on the institutional church.

This qualitative sociological study interviewed in depth nearly 100 people who had "made an active, deliberate decision to leave the institutional church" (28); the authors came to call them the "dechurched" and/or the "Dones." Although all their stories are unique, four common themes why they left showed through – reasons the authors did not expect.

First, the most important thing that people want in a church is a community who are experiencing God together and the Dones are no different. In fact, "a sense of community is so important that it will keep

people in churches that they don't otherwise care for" (31). This is the main reason why people will stick with a church they hate because shopping for a whole new community is so difficult. The Dones repeatedly said they desired a church "where people are loved collectively rather than judged individually" (32). While judgment will drive them away, if they ever had a true, trusting community, they will long to get that back. But judgment is the killer. And churches so often want "everyone to sign on to a common belief system before they can begin to do life with each other. This is not only a dubious way to practice Christianity according to [the Dones], but also a profoundly ineffective way to build community" (40). And it doesn't help when church leaders make lifestyle judgments without owning up to their own inadequacies. The dechurched view "this as intellectually and morally dishonest, inauthentic, and an overreach of power.... Hypocrisy."

Secondly, the bureaucracy of the church gets in the way of growing in Christ when too much church activity is aimed at just keeping the place going. The Dones often leave when they understand that the structure of the church is getting in the way of their serving and growing in God. They want to be involved in meaningful activity, particularly in relationship formation, not internally focused housework of keeping organizational structures functioning. Many churches run on a top-down, controlling leadership style which stifles creativity and the desire of members to help shape its direction. They want to be more than just entry-level employees working for a large machine. "Top-down hierarchy of worship- and ministry-planning not only alienated these committed volunteers and staff from doing church work, but it also alienated them spiritually" (61). So when the Dones leave church, they tend to construct alternatives through civic engagement, small groups and others sorts of spiritually more meaningful gatherings. That's missing in most Sunday morning worship services, which they believe are just a resource hog. "Nobody, not one single respondent, mentioned replacing church with a worship service or with a sermon series or with committee work. They are replacing church with meaningful activity that engages their communities and builds relationship, things they find missing in the church" (76).

Thirdly, the Dones are concerned with the type of conversation that goes on at church. Church talk is usually argumentative, where two people state their positions without any intention of being influenced by the other, or dictatorial, where one person does all the talking and the other all the listening. The Dones hate this. They highly prefer authentic conversation where both parties are open to being influenced by the other. And shadow missions are abhorrent to them. Church planters and other religious missional groups who use a "relationship first" model where they pursue conversation with ulterior motives like getting them to come to church is seen as dishonest. "Our respondents told us that the underlying message is that the person being invited to church or God is somehow less than the person extending the invitation. They said the tacit message is that there's something fundamentally wrong, broken, or, at best, not fully realized, about that person's life that can only be fixed by coming to church and being like the person doing the inviting. Our respondents viewed this as inherently judgmental and counterproductive to relationships they wanted to be built on mutual respect and authentic conversation" (83). So doctrine, a prepackaged set of beliefs, can actually hinder gaining an understanding of God, instead of helping. Just as university professors are coming to realize that being the sage on the stage has become less effective than being their students' guide at their side, so also pastors need to see their role less as one conveying wisdom and knowledge to one who develops and facilitates understanding.

What Packard and Hope are relaying here in describing the reasons why extremely active and knowledgeable Christians are leaving the church is not another example of the growing religious individualism previously described by Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart's* personal syncretic religion or

Christian Smith's *Soul Searching's* moralistic therapeutic deism. While this group is more interested in the group over the individual, "they bristle at the notion that unity means uniformity" (93). For the church to be able to reengage these folks, it will have to "adopt policies and practices that disseminate power, reduce the role of the pastor as the holder and conveyor of all knowledge, and utilize organizational resources to empower people rather than to control them" (94).

Lastly, the Dones find that there is an extremely strong disconnect between the moral teachings of the church and actually engaging the world meaningfully. The is seen as wanting to police behavior to the exclusion of dealing with endemic economic issues, an orientation which comes across as an expression of power, control and authority. Church leaders are not seen as having their congregants' best interests at heart. To the Dones, "preaching a message about the evils of drinking seem[s] like so much small change compared to big-ticket items such as poverty, racism, and gender inequality" (100). In fact, "there was a broad feeling among the surveyees of this study that the teachings of the church actually resulted in very little impact on lives around them – just doing lifestyle indoctrination and very little soul transformation. It's not that they were "done with church because they disagreed with the church's theology or because they disliked the people. These are the reasons people switch churches. People opt out of organized religion altogether because they think the structure is fundamentally flawed" (104).

So this movement of mature Christians leaving the institutional church has nothing to do with theological orientation. What they deeply desire is to be able to share Christ's transformational message in meaningful ways, but the current Christian church structure and judgmental attitudes simply get in the way.

Chapter 6 makes four practical suggestions for implementing corrective action that churches can do to help the dechurched to reengage. First, invite participation, with limits, to encourage people to start meaningful ministries that are on their hearts. Trust your community. Second, undermine bureaucracy by putting timelines on some positions and committees so they dissolve when the timeline ends no matter what. Third, be truly relational by devoting "staff time and resources to knowing and supporting people rather than creating and maintaining programs. Do things *with* congregants rather than *for* congregants" (114). And fourth, impact your community and be impacted at the grassroots level. Enable your community by helping them do things rather than doing things for them. "Instead, allow the celebrations and struggles of your local community to change and shape your congregation" (114). Is there any other organization beyond the church that puts so much time and energy into training their people while doing so little to retain them? It just makes sense that those within your midst who are your most creative, involved and emotionally invested be encouraged in multiple ways to be highly engaged and fulfilled.

While this book is based on a sociological study, it is not an academic work and therefore contains no structured data and no index. It is an effort to translate the research findings into a practical book for students, lay folk and church leaders. It draws attention to an overlooked and extremely important segment of church members who are leaving in droves. The project was undertaken by the authors between 2012 and 2014 at the University of Northern Colorado. Although few of the survey respondents were bitter or angry at the church, the conversations were not easy to undertake. These people are alone. One of the last people interviewed for this project told the authors, "Thank you for listening to my story. Nobody has ever cared before. At least, nobody in the church has ever cared" (140).

This book is ground breaking and should be in every Christian university, Bible school and seminary in the world and as a textbook in classrooms. How we do church now is so very, very flawed. Our best and brightest and most active are leaving because the church is getting in the way of their spiritual development and the sharing of their faith that they so desperately want to do. May God help us to understand the dynamics described in this book so we can rescue the church and reorient our members towards the salvation of our neighbors as Jesus taught.