



The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going To Church

by Jake Meador, for *The Atlantic*

Nearly everyone I grew up with in my childhood church in Lincoln, Nebraska, is no longer Christian. That's not unusual. Forty million Americans have stopped attending church in the past 25 years. That's something like 12 percent of the population, and it represents the largest concentrated change in church attendance in American history. As a Christian, I feel this shift acutely. My wife and I wonder whether the institutions and communities that have helped preserve us in our own faith will still exist for our four children, let alone whatever grandkids we might one day have.

This change is also bad news for America as a whole: Participation in a religious community generally correlates with better health outcomes and longer life, higher financial generosity, and more stable families - all of which are desperately needed in a nation with rising rates of loneliness, mental illness, and alcohol and drug dependency.

A new book, written by Jim Davis, a pastor at an evangelical church in Orlando, and Michael Graham, a writer with the Gospel Coalition, draws on surveys of more than 7,000 Americans by the political scientists Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe, attempting to explain why people have left churches - or "dechurched," in the book's lingo—and what, if anything, can be done to get some people to come back. The book raises an intriguing possibility: What if the problem isn't that churches are asking too much of their members, but that they aren't asking nearly enough?

The Great De-churching finds that religious abuse and more general moral corruption in churches have driven people away. This is, of course, an indictment of the failures of many leaders who did not address abuse in their church. But Davis and Graham also find that a much larger share of those who have left church have done so for more banal reasons. The book suggests that the defining problem driving out most people who leave is ... just how American life works in the 21st century. Contemporary America simply isn't set up to promote mutuality, care, or common life. Rather, it is designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success. Such a system leaves precious little time or energy for forms of community that don't contribute to one's own professional life or, as one ages, the professional prospects of one's children. Workism reigns in America, and because of it, community in America, religious community included, is a math problem that doesn't add up.

Numerous victims of abuse in church environments can identify a moment when they lost the ability to believe, when they almost felt their faith draining out of them. The book shows, though, that for most Americans who were once a part of churches but have since left, the process of leaving was gradual, and in many cases they didn't realize it was even happening until it already had. It's less like jumping off a cliff and more like driving down a slope, eventually realizing that you can no longer see the place you started from.

Consider one of the composite characters that Graham and Davis use in the book to describe a typical evangelical dechurched: a 30-something woman who grew up in a suburban megachurch, was

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TUESDAY THRU FRIDAY
9:00 A.M. TO 2:00 P.M.



*Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said,
'Surely the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it!'
- Genesis 28:16*

Dear Friends,

Jacob's heavenly dream of angels ascending and descending on a great ladder between heaven and earth was the focus of our Sunday worship service a few weeks ago. Since then, I've been in awe at the many, many ways God continues to show up in our community!

In June, we returned to a more traditional style of communion distribution. The pandemic caused churches of all traditions to reconsider and adapt one of the church's most important rituals to a time when sharing of any kind was discouraged. Returning to the practice of intinction, while still offering individual elements to those who wish, has shown us that we can, and must, adapt to the times we are living in. We'll never get back to normal because, frankly, normal wasn't working very well. But a return to something so important to our discipleship in Christ is a sturdy reminder of the unchanging nature of the God we worship.

We also feasted and celebrated at our annual church picnic in June and we are so grateful to the Deacons and many other church members and staff for making that day possible!

The "Going Deeper" book study group continued faithfully even as the river and the lake came a callin.' We wrapped up this year-long study with two practical texts: *Soul Feast* by Marjorie Thompson, an invitation to Christian spiritual practice, and *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, which has been guiding Christian community since it was written during the Nazi regime in Germany. The most profound and impactful part of "Going Deeper" was the large group and small group discussion, where we could test and debate the ideas we read. We didn't agree with everything we read and some books resonated with the group while others didn't. But that's what faith is about, right? Searching. Asking questions. Listening to others. Finding God.

In July, the church was transformed for *Hero Hotline*, our Vacation Bible School for 2023! We learned about grace, faith, listening to God, and helping others with 15 young superheroes and their sidekicks. We always wish to have more young disciples join us for exciting opportunities like this. But I've learned over the years that God brings us exactly who needs to be here and, according to Matthew 25, God looks on our ministries not by how many people attend but by how much love we share. And we shared a lot of love during VBS!

Two significant outreach ministries of the church continued apace this summer, as well. The Open Table returned in June after a sabbatical in May, and is serving upwards of 200 of our neighbors each month. The Spare Closet continues to serve our community with no-cost clothing and household goods, and the community has been so generous that they had to stop accepting donations in order to catch up! Tuesdays and Thursdays, when The Spare Closet is open, are two of my most favorite office days because I get to look out my office windows and see the smiles of those coming and going. It is like the smiles we see when we deliver meals from The Open Table to our homebound church members!

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And in the background, your Session has been faithfully working on several projects such as the restoration of the church's steeple and revisions to the church's bylaws. The church has already received a transformational gift of \$1 million towards the steeple restoration and a fundraising campaign is currently being designed to raise another \$1 million to complete the project and establish a fund for ongoing capital maintenance - more on that later! The bylaw revisions helped us to discern who and what God is calling our church community to be and will guide us in our mission and ministry for many years to come!

And how could I forget that we also welcomed back the church's historic Steinway grand piano after a year-long restoration at the Steinway factory in Iowa! It has already greatly enriched our worship and the restoration has been entirely funded with about \$300 left over!

So, what's next? Well, much of the same and more! We will continue to worship, learn together, and share fellowship because that is what Christ has called us to do. Sunday School for our young disciples will begin again on **September 10** and we look forward to welcome back our neighborhood ghouls and goblins for Trunk-or-Treat on **October 27**. I've heard that Santa is already getting ready to have breakfast with us on **December 9**, and a new, family-friendly, special worship opportunity is in the planning stages for **Advent 2023**. The Open Table will serve delicious meals to our community on **August 27, September 24, October 29, and November 26**, and The Spare Closet will open every Tuesday and Thursday from 10am-2pm as long as the donations keep coming in!

Surely the Lord is in this place! Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

Andrew



The Christian education program at First Pres has a couple of volunteer opportunities to offer. We would like to add some more Sunday school teachers to our roster. Currently teachers serve on Sunday about 6 weeks apart. We could increase that gap to every other month if we had another volunteer or two. That's only 5 Sundays a year! We do not have class on Communion Sundays. We would also like some aides for our Sunday School classroom. During our VBS program, we had additional helpers in our sessions besides the teacher/leader. This has proven very successful and we would like to duplicate this success on Sundays. Our goal would be to have enough volunteers so each would only serve every other month. For more information or to let us know you are willing to give this a try, please contact Kim Collins, Michele Elmer or Bunny Gorman.

As a reminder, our **Sunday school begins on September 10.**

Legos for Sunday School!

Starting in October this year CE will be offering one Sunday a month a lesson with legos! Kids will hear a bible story and then develop the scene with legos. To do this we need YOUR HELP! Have you, your kids or grandkids out grown your legos (gasp)? Perhaps you have too many (gasp)? If you said yes to either of those questions would you consider donating them to the Sunday School program. There will be a box on the table next to the kitchen in Fellowship Hall for any you think you can part with.

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heavily invested in a campus ministry while in college, then after graduating moved into a full-time job and began attending a young-adults group in a local church. In her 20s, she meets a guy who is less religiously engaged, they get married, and, at some point early in their marriage, after their first or second child is born, they stop going to church. Maybe the baby isn't sleeping well and when Sunday morning comes around, it is simply easier to stay home and catch whatever sleep is available as the baby (finally) falls asleep. In other cases, a person might be entering mid-career, working a high-stress job requiring a 60- or 70-hour workweek. Add to that 15 hours of commute time, and suddenly something like two-thirds of their waking hours in the week are already accounted for. And so when a friend invites them to a Sunday-morning brunch, they probably want to go to church, but they also want to see that friend, because they haven't been able to see them for months. The friend wins out.

After a few weeks of either scenario, the thought of going to church on Sunday carries a certain mental burden with it—you might want to go, but you also dread the inevitable questions about where you have been. “I skipped church to go to brunch with a friend” or “I was just too tired to come” don't sound like convincing excuses as you rehearse the conversation in your mind. Soon it actually sounds like it'd be harder to attend than to skip, even if some part of you still wants to go. The underlying challenge for many is that their lives are stretched like a rubber band about to snap - and church attendance ends up feeling like an item on a checklist that's already too long.

What can churches do in such a context? In theory, the Christian Church could be an antidote to all that. What is more needed in our time than a community marked by sincere love, sharing what they have from each according to their ability and to each according to their need, eating together regularly, generously serving neighbors, and living lives of quiet virtue and prayer? A healthy church can be a safety net in the harsh American economy by offering its members material assistance in times of need: meals after a baby is born, money for rent after a layoff. Perhaps more important, it reminds people that their identity is not in their job or how much money they make; they are children of God, loved and protected and infinitely valuable.

But a vibrant, life-giving church requires more, not less, time and energy from its members. It asks people to prioritize one another over our career, to prioritize prayer and time reading scripture over accomplishment. This may seem like a tough sell in an era of dechurching. If people are already leaving - especially if they are leaving because they feel too busy and burned out to attend church regularly - why would they want to be part of a church that asks so much of them?

Although understandable, that isn't quite the right question. The problem in front of us is not that we have a healthy, sustainable society that doesn't have room for church. The problem is that many Americans have adopted a way of life that has left us lonely, anxious, and uncertain of how to live in community with other people. The tragedy of American churches is that they have been so caught up in this same world that we now find they have nothing to offer these suffering people that can't be more easily found somewhere else. American churches have too often been content to function as a kind of vaguely spiritual NGO, an organization of detached individuals who meet together for religious services that inspire them, provide practical life advice, or offer positive emotional experiences. Too often it has not been a community that through its preaching and living bears witness to another way to live.

The theologian Stanley Hauerwas captured the problem well when he said that “pastoral care has become obsessed with the personal wounds of people in advanced industrial societies who have discovered that their lives lack meaning.” The difficulty is that many of the wounds and aches provoked by our current order aren't of a sort that can be managed or life-hacked away. They are resolved only by

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changing one's life, by becoming a radically different sort of person belonging to a radically different sort of community.

Last fall, I spent several days in New York City, during which time I visited a home owned by a group of pacifist Christians that lives from a common purse - meaning the members do not have privately held property but share their property and money. Their simple life and shared finances allow their schedules to be more flexible, making for a thicker immediate community and greater generosity to neighbors, as well as a richer life of prayer and private devotion to God, all supported by a deep commitment to their church.

This is, admittedly, an extreme example. But this community was thriving not because it found ways to scale down what it asked of its members but because it found a way to scale up what they provided to one another. Their way of living frees them from the treadmill of workism. Work, in this community, is judged not by the money it generates but by the people it serves. In a workist culture that believes dignity is grounded in accomplishment, simply reclaiming this alternative form of dignity becomes a radical act.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells his first disciples to leave their old way of life behind, going so far as abandoning their plow or fishing nets where they are and, if necessary, even leaving behind their parents. A church that doesn't expect at least this much from one another isn't really a church in the way Jesus spoke about it. If Graham and Davis are right, it also is likely a church that won't survive the challenges facing us today.

The great de-churching could be the beginning of a new moment for churches, a moment marked less by aspiration to respectability and success, with less focus on individuals aligning themselves with American values and assumptions. We could be a witness to another way of life outside conventionally American measures of success. Churches could model better, truer sorts of communities, ones in which the hungry are fed, the weak are lifted up, and the proud are cast down. Such communities might not have the money, success, and influence that many American churches have so often pursued in recent years. But if such communities look less like those churches, they might also look more like the sorts of communities Jesus expected his followers to create.

A note from Pastor Andrew: I chose to include this article in this month's newsletter because I believe it speaks to the some of the transformative ministries going on currently at FPC Watertown. I also chose it because Jake Meador speaks from a part of the Christian family tree quite different from our own and a diversity of voices in our walk of faith is essential!



September 3	William Gerot	September 13	Cynthia Ahlheim
September 4	Jonathan White, Jr.	September 13	Elizabeth Rudd
September 5	Jordan Garry	September 16	Sean Gorman
September 5	Jauri Jantzi	September 19	Anna Van Slyke
September 6	Pat Macklin	September 19	Gene McCandless
September 9	Kevin Kieff	September 21	Don Klug
September 9	Skyler Green	September 22	Caitlin Archibald
September 10	Michael Shanahan II	September 30	Lucy Hiotis
September 11	Caleb Way		

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The Open Table

*O taste and see that the Lord is good!—Psalm 34:8



August 27th, 5PM

Menu:
**Pulled pork sandwich,
coleslaw, pickle,
acini de pepe salad**

September 24th, 5PM



Volunteers are always welcome, sign-up sheets are on the board in Fellowship Hall.

Each month, seeing the people walk into our door to get a hot meal for their family and see the smile on their faces as they leave is such a heart-warming feeling. This ministry is a blessing to us all.