

# In Through the Out Door

Why People are Leaving the Church

Church leaders have focused so much on techniques and strategies to get people into the front door of their church building that they have neglected to consider why so many people quietly slip out the back door - most of them never to return.

## Losing Faith in Church

The statistics are clear: people are leaving the church at a rapid pace. According to a twelve-year research project overseen by British demographer David Barrett for Oxford University Press, some 2,765,100 church attenders in Europe and North America leave the church each year. That works out to be an average of 7,600 a day, 53,000 a year (p. 252).

According to William D. Hendricks, most of these people have not lost faith in God. They have lost faith in the church. They have "grown disillusioned with the church and other institutions of Christianity" and have "lost the energy and enthusiasm they once had for programs of spiritual development." Consequently, they "are now looking elsewhere to meet their deepest spiritual needs" (p. 11).

In his book, [\*Exit Interviews: Revealing Stories of Why People are Leaving the Church\*](#), Hendricks provides us with a "focus group" of approximately twenty former church members who offer honest, critical feedback concerning their church experience. By listening to their stories, we may be able to learn how to better guard the back doors of our churches. After all, our mission is not simply to bring people to conversion, but to make disciples - a life-long process.

Before considering the reasons people gave for leaving, it is important to consider what Hendricks' focus group did *not* say. Not one expressed a desire to abandon their faith in God. Not one judged the clergy as dishonest. Not one condemned the church as a place full of hypocrites. Not one really wanted to leave the church. It was only after numerous failed attempts to remain in the church that they finally left (pp. 258-259). They left for numerous reasons - legalism, boredom, disillusionment, and burn-out were among them - but most of the reasons were not the "usual suspects."

Strangely enough, the most common reason cited for leaving the church was spiritual in nature. Almost every person interviewed did not feel that they had any real significant spiritual experiences in church. This complaint is not limited to the 20 people in Hendricks' focus group. According to Gallup's study *The Unchurched American*, 60 percent of the unchurched believe that "most churches and synagogues have lost the real spiritual part of religion," and 50 percent agree that "most churches and synagogues are not effective in helping people find meaning in life" (p. 249).

Imagine those who have left the church complaining that the church should be more spiritual! Could it be that those outside the church are more spiritual than those inside? According to Gallup's study, of the 41 percent of the United States population that have no church connection, "45 percent... pray every day, 64 percent claim to believe that Jesus is God or the Son of God, 68 percent believe in Christ's resurrection, and 77 percent had some religious training during childhood" (p. 249). Meanwhile, other studies have demonstrated that there is no compelling evidence that church attendance makes any significant difference in church members' religious views or behavior.

How can people reject the institution of the church while still retaining belief in God? Hendricks offers a good analogy to help in understanding this paradox:

It seems that more and more people today feel about their religious institutions the way they feel about the institutions of government. Just as church membership and attendance are languishing, so voter participation is low and cynicism runs high. *The Wall Street Journal* reports that during the past two

decades, the number of people who have expressed confidence in the federal government's ability to do its job has dropped from 74 percent to only 42 percent. Yet notice: Americans by and large have not lost faith in the ideals of democracy and freedom. We believe in those as strongly as ever. But there is real doubt as to whether the current system is living up to anywhere near those ideals. (p. 253)

People are leaving the church because their deepest spiritual needs are not being met. They do not feel like they experience God at church. Before we condemn them we must consider how devastating this critique is to the church. What a sad commentary! People want authentic spirituality. People want to encounter God. And they do not feel that our churches are helping them in this pursuit!

Hendricks has performed a valuable service to the church by providing these exit interviews. By revealing why people leave the church, the interviews shed light on what attracts people to church *and* what keeps them in church. By listening to their complaints, we can make changes to our churches in order to both reach *and* keep people.

## Reaching *and* Keeping People

People approach church with three critical questions:

- Will I be accepted and loved?
- Will I be helped on my spiritual journey?
- Will I meet God?

These questions do not change once they have joined a church. Conversion is not *the* answer to these questions. "Conversion is merely the first step in the journey... Coming to faith is not the beginning of the tale but rather a key development in an ongoing plot" (p. 263). The same grace needed in conversion is needed throughout the entirety of the spiritual journey. Once a person converts to Christianity, the search for God is not over - it has just begun. Greater intimacy with God is the goal and it comes about through a committed pattern of seeking God throughout the duration of the Christian's life. Constant grace, continual growth, and greater intimacy with God are vital aspects of Christian living. Thus, the three critical questions never lose their relevance in the believer's life. In order to attract and retain people we must remain committed to positively addressing each of the three critical questions at every stage of the journey.

### A Grace-Place

If a church is to attract and keep people, it must be a place of acceptance and love - a place of grace. People come to our churches wondering: "Will I fit in?" "Is this church a place for me?" "Is this a house that I can call home?" People come looking for grace as well as truth. We in the church are called to practice hospitality and open our homes, lives, and church buildings to others as a warm, welcoming place. We are challenged by the gospel to "accept one another as God in Christ has accepted us" (Romans 15:7) - fully, freely, warmly, compassionately, whole-heartedly, lovingly, graciously.

The church must be a grace-place. We must not only speak of the necessity of God's grace in conversion; we must also speak of the necessity of God's grace in sanctification - indeed, at every stage of the Christian life. God's grace is what attracts us *and* keeps us. To lose sight of this is to transform the Christian journey from a liberating path of love and acceptance to an oppressive obstacle course of impossible ideals. A constant diet of the latter will almost certainly lead sensitive souls to the back door.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy was that a system promising forgiveness to people and freedom from guilt ended up making so many of them feel guilty. That, in turn, led to chronic legalism. At every turn, they staggered under massive expectations that they never could quite fulfill... Thus grace became a theological fiction. (pp. 266- 267)

The greatest enemy to the existence of a creating and maintaining a grace-place is legalism. Because of the high ideals of the Christian faith, it is easy to lose sight of grace. Nit-picking criticisms, self-righteous condemnation, and magnifying minor concerns into major sins results when grace does not pervade a church.

Hendricks pulls no punches when it comes to exposing and eradicating legalism from our churches:

I believe that the church needs to decide how long it is going to coddle legalists in its ranks. By legalists I mean people who preach grace but practice works. People who inflict guilt on others for being human, let alone sinful. People who say, "Well, we don't want to go overboard on this grace thing because people will take advantage of it." The church has made it comfortable for those who hold that position. But at what cost! Legalism is keeping people out of the church, it is driving people away from the church, and it is poisoning the lives of those who remain in the church. So why permit it? Why even tolerate it, especially when Jesus and Paul, among others, reserved their harshest words for those who compromised grace? (p. 280)

Accepting others also involves respecting the feelings of those within the church. The church must do a better job of helping its members identify and express their emotions. A church that consistently represses emotions is bound to lose members. Those who really desire to grow in their whole being will never rest satisfied with a faith that is merely intellectual. Many that Hendricks interviewed left the church because it refused to help them understand and work through their emotional issues - assuming that conversion automatically took care of deep psychological problems. "I noticed an interesting phenomenon: there seemed to be a correlation between people coming alive to their emotions and their exit from the church" (p. 267).

Ultimately, accepting others as God accepts us in Christ involves accepting people who are different.

Can we accept people who have placed faith in the gospel of Christ and yet differ radically from us on issues of all kinds - philosophical, theological, moral, political? Can we tolerate people's search for answers *after* conversion as well as before? In fact, is intellectual inquiry not merely tolerated by *encouraged*? What if someone comes to different conclusions? Is she still welcome in our church? In many cases, no. In many cases, Christians act as though there were a single, monolithic "Christian position" on every question to which any "true believer" must hold. (p. 79)

Often the ones most unable to accept diversity are those committed to maintaining a comfortable environment of homogeneous people committed to maintaining the status quo at all costs. Those who are different pay the price of marginalization through emotional distancing.

The church has a long way to go in learning how to experience true unity through genuine diversity. A commitment to creating and maintaining an accepting, loving environment - a grace-space - is vital in order to both attract and keep people.

### **A Growth-Place**

If a church is to attract and keep people, it must be a place where people are personally helped in their spiritual journey. They must feel that the church is personally concerned for their own individual spiritual growth. They reject the notion that busyness in church activities automatically leads to spiritual growth. They clearly see that, all too often, busyness is a substitute for spiritual maturity.

Many of those interviewed by Hendricks expressed utter boredom when it came to church. One man named Vince responded to a contemporary service designed to draw people like him in this way: "Boredom! Bored me to tears. I mean, the programs? Bored me. The people? Bored me. The approach? Bored me. The services? Bored me" (p. 115). Many, like Vince, are bored by our programs, people, and services. They are not satisfied with neatly organized packages. "The people I spoke with showed extreme antipathy toward formulas and 'packaged' Christianity" (p. 261).

The church needs to place more emphasis on a theology of spirituality and spiritual formation.

[S]pirituality is probably the foremost theological category in people's minds today. As long as the church lacks a cogent doctrine in this area, it will keep losing credibility - which is to say it will keep losing people. Why? Because people no longer evaluate Christianity on the basis of whether it is true, but *how* it is true. [T]oday's question is not whether God exists, but what difference does He make? (p. 277).

We must emphasize spirituality as a process, a journey. No journey is the same. And no one has yet arrived. We must make every effort to reject the canned programs that treat all people identically and embrace a spiritual formation that respects the individual and his or her interests and gifts.

Spiritual formation must embrace all of life. The secular/sacred dichotomy must be rejected. People do not want a religion that divides their world, but one that unites their whole life with meaning, purpose, and significance. People are not interested in a culturally ignorant or apathetic church. They have experienced a spirituality of the arts. They reject a perspective that radically separates the church from the world. They seek a culturally engaged ministry that embraces all of life.

### **A God-Place**

If a church is to attract and keep people, it must be a place where people meet God. People leave our churches because they feel that God is lost in the commotion of frenetic activity and canned programs. This is a serious criticism that must be addressed.

It's a serious matter, because the question, *Where is God?* - the doctrine of God's immanence - lies at the heart of why people come to church. They expect to find God there. And why not? If you can't find God in the church, or by extension through the programs and practices prescribed by the church, then where can you find Him? (pp. 265-266).

When institutions become an enemy to spiritual life, they must either be restructured or rejected. It is important to remember that "structure [is] a means to an end, not the end itself. There is nothing sacred about structure. It is always negotiable" (p. 274). Institutions more committed to preserving their structure than growing their people have lost sight of the reason for the institution.

William Hendricks has given us much to consider. Although it is painful, we must stand with him at the "out door" of the church and listen carefully to why people are leaving the church. Only by going "in through the out door" can we learn why people are leaving and make the changes necessary to not only make converts but also to make disciples.

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