Why People Are Leaving Church:
Analyzing the De-Churching Trend and Finding Paths to Renewal

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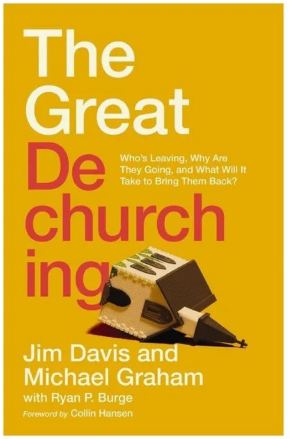
Resource

The Great De-Churching:

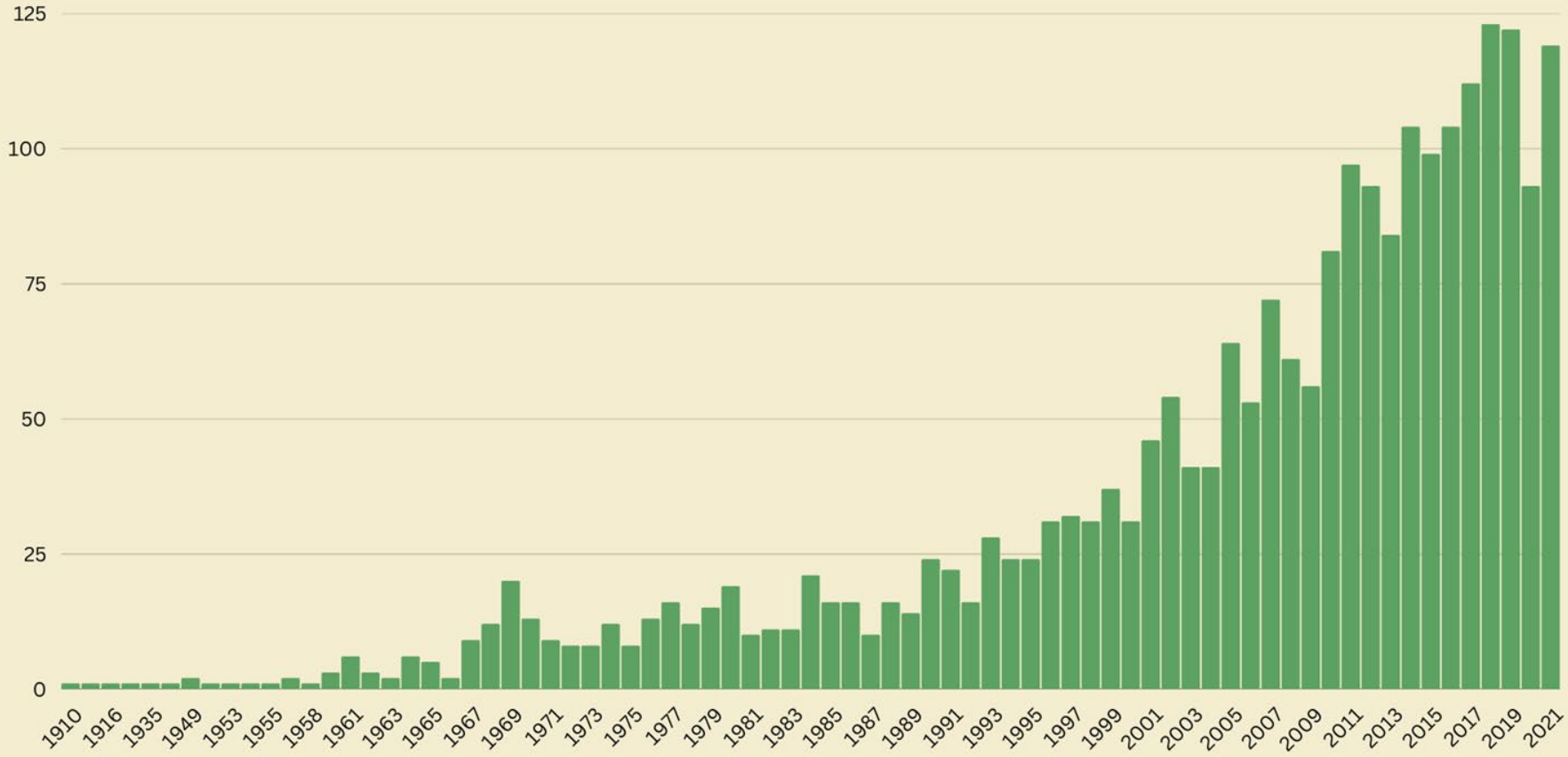
Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back

by Jim Davis and Michael Graham



A Definition of De-Churching

Adult Americans who used to attend a congregation monthly or more frequently and now attend less than once per year (seldom or never).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Impact of the 1990's

- Fall of the Soviet Union
- Rise of the internet
- Rise of the "Religious Right"
- The attack of 9/11

Casual De-Churching
30 Million People

- Moved
- Attending inconvenient
- Other priorities for time and money

De-Churched Casualties
10 Million People

- Didn’t fit within the congregation
- Suffering
- Church hurt
- Clergy scandal

Four Evangelical
De-Churching Profiles

- Cultural Christians
- Mainstream Evangelicals
- Exvangelicals
- BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color)

Cultural Christians
Who Are They?

- 58% male and 42% female
- Average age is 40 (but de-churched average age was 29)
- 87% married
- 98% white

Cultural Christians
Orthodoxy Scores

- 56% orthodoxy score
- 1% Jesus is the Son of God
- 22% Bible is the literal word of God
- High youth and college ministry involvement

Cultural Christians
Why They Left

1. Attending was inconvenient (18%)
2. My friends were not attending worship services (18%)
3. I moved to a new community (17%)
4. Suffering changed my views of God and/or congregation (17%)

Cultural Christians
Why They Left

5. I wanted to be able to personally express my gender identity (17%)
6. I chose to worship completely online (16%)
7. Scandal involving clergy in the broader culture (16%)
8. I felt the church was being too restrictive of my sexual freedom (16%)

Cultural Christians
Why Might They Return

1. New friends (28%)
2. Lonely and want to make new friends (22%)
3. Supernatural phenomena (19%)
4. Begin to miss church (19%)

Cultural Christians
Why Might They Return

5. Friend invites me (18%)
6. Spouse wants to go (18%)
7. Move and want to make new friends (18%)
8. A good community (16%)

Cultural Christians
What They Need

1. Sincere community
2. Mental health help
3. Sound doctrine and spiritual formation
4. Better engagement in 18-39 age range

Mainstream Evan
Who Are They?

- 39% male and 61% female
- Average age is 40 (but de-churched average age was 37)
- 66% married and 15% divorced
- 91% white and 6% black

Mainstream Evan
Orthodoxy Scores

- 86% orthodoxy score
- 98% Jesus is the Son of God
- 59% Bible is the literal word of God
- High youth and above average college ministry involvement

Mainstream Evan
Why They Left

1. I moved to a new community (22%)
2. Attending was inconvenient (16%)
3. COVID-19 got me out of the habit (15%)
4. Divorce, remarriage or another family change (15%)

Mainstream Evan
Why They Left

5. I didn't fit within the congregation (14%)
6. I didn't experience much love within the congregation (12%)

Mainstream Evan
Why Might They Return

1. New friends (38%)
2. God tells me to go back in some significant way (35%)
3. I find a church I like (34%)
4. Begin to miss church (33%)

Mainstream Evan
Why Might They Return

5. Feel the distance from God (32%)
6. A good pastor (30%)
7. Lonely and want to make new friends (22%)
8. I find a church that takes both doctrine and ethics seriously (22%)

Mainstream Evan
What They Need

1. Relational nudge from churched person(s)
2. Take doctrine and ethics seriously
3. Challenge distance from God
4. Better engagement in 18-39 age range

Exvangelicals
Who Are They?

- 35% male and 65% female
- Average age is 53 (but de-churched average age was 34)
- 54% married and 17% divorced
- 82% white and 13% black

Exvangelicals
Orthodoxy Scores

- 70% orthodoxy score
- 97% Jesus is the Son of God
- 44% Bible is the literal word of God
- Above average youth, but low college ministry involvement

Exvangelicals
Why They Left

1. I didn't fit within the congregation (23%)
2. I moved to a new community (21%)
3. Attending was inconvenient (18%)
4. I didn't experience much love within the congregation (18%)

Exvangelicals
Why They Left

5. I disagreed with the politics of the congregation (15%)
6. I had negative experiences in an evangelical church (15%)
7. I no longer believed what the congregation believed (14%)
8. I disagreed with the politics of the clergy (13%)

Exvangelicals
Why Might They Return

1. God tells me to go back in some significant way (28%)
2. I find a church I like (27%)
3. A good pastor (22%)
4. Never going back (21%)

Exvangelicals
Why Might They Return

5. Feel the distance from God (19%)
6. I find a church who cares about justice and compassion for vulnerable people (17%)
7. A good community (17%)
8. Begin to miss church (16%)

Exvangelicals
What They Need

1. Non-partisan church community
2. Take doctrine and ethics seriously
3. Mental health help
4. Empathetic community and clergy

BIPOC
Who Are They?

- 68% male and 32% female
- Average age is 51 (but de-churched average age was 27)
- 80% married and 4% divorced
- 76% black and 13% hispanic

BIPOC
Orthodoxy Scores

- 58% orthodoxy score
- 13% Jesus is the Son of God
- 29% Bible is the literal word of God
- Low youth, but high college ministry involvement

BIPOC
Why They Left

1. I moved to a new community (21%)
2. Faith just wasn't working (19%)
3. I had other priorities for my time and money (18%)
4. Suffering changed my views of God and/or the congregation (18%)

BIPOC
Why They Left

5. I began to doubt God's existence (18%)
6. Scandal involving clergy in my congregation (17%)
7. I didn't see the congregation doing enough good in the community (16%)
8. The messages were not relevant to my life (16%)

BIPOC
Why Might They Return

1. New friends (33%)
2. Moved and want to make new friends (27%)
3. Lonely and want to make new friends (27%)
4. Child wants to go (22%)

BIPOC
Why Might They Return

5. Friend invites me (21%)
6. A good community (20%)
7. Spouse wants to go (18%)
8. Feel the distance from God (18%)

BIPOC
What They Need

1. Cultural and emotional intelligence
2. Deep friendship
3. Sound doctrine and spiritual formation
4. Better engagement in the 13-30 age range

Four Questions to Ask a Neighbor

- Do you go to church?
- Did you used to go to church?
- Why did you leave the church?
- Who is Jesus to you?

Mainline
Who Are They?

- 32% male and 68% female
- Average age is 58 (but de-churched average age was 32)
- 47% married and 14% divorced
- 95% white

Mainline
Orthodoxy Scores

- 57% orthodoxy score
- 69% Jesus is the Son of God
- 15% Bible is the literal word of God
- High youth, but very low college ministry involvement

Mainline
Why They Left

1. I moved to a new community (25%)
2. I had other priorities for time and money (15%)
3. I didn’t fit within the congregation (14%)
4. I disagreed with the politics of the congregation (13%)

Mainline
Why They Left

5. I began to doubt God's existence (10%)
6. Attending was inconvenient (10%)
7. Divorce, remarriage, or other family change (9%)
8. I didn't experience much love within the congregation (8%)

Mainline
What They Need

1. Word and deed together
2. Avoid racism, misogyny, and partisan politics
3. Sound doctrine and spiritual formation
4. Higher regard for the Bible

Biggest Myths

1. People leave because of negative experiences with church
2. Young people leave because of secular university
3. People leave the church because they left the faith
4. People are leaving primarily on the secular left

Biggest Myths

5. People aren’t willing to come back
6. America’s peak religiosity was around the time of our founding
7. De-churching is happening primarily to the upwardly mobile
8. All is lost!

Five Exhortations
for the Church

1. Embrace both sound doctrine and active mission
2. Engage the hard work of disciple-making
3. Discover how to flourish in exile
4. Invest into the emerging generations
5. Equip future apostles, leaders, evangelists, pastors and teachers

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Discussion Q's

- What surprised you?

- What is one thing your church could do differently to better engage one or more of these de-churched categories?

Open Q&A

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