

LIFE IN THE POSTMODERN SHIFT

Into the wilderness

TROY WATSON



Over the past few years, I've been inundated with stories, statistics, articles, books and documentaries chronicling the mass exodus of people leaving the church.

The most recent to make waves was a blog post published several weeks ago by Donald Miller, a best-selling Christian author, explaining why he doesn't attend church any more. Although I don't agree with him in many areas, I applaud him for initiating an honest and open conversation on why he and millions of others in North America no longer think attending church is good stewardship of their time. I've come to understand many Christians make the decision to stop attending church because they value their faith and relationship with God.

The response of "church loyalists" to the phenomenon of church abandonment has been all over the map. Some Christians are angry that so many are leaving the church, while others are afraid. Some are in denial, while others are grieving and losing hope. Some blame contemporary culture, universities, the media, postmodernism, individualism and everything else under the sun—except themselves, usually—while others are desperately trying to adapt and attract people to their church by incorporating more technology, pop culture, or socially "relevant" issues and causes into their gatherings and programming.

Some churches are studying and researching the 21st-century missional context, asking tough questions about the evolving role of the church in our world, and experimenting with new ways of doing and being church, while others are convinced the solution is found in getting back to the old "tried and true" ways of the past.

I suppose most of these responses have

their appropriate time, place and setting, but I'm not sure how helpful any of them will be on their own in the long run. What is most interesting to me in this unsettling season for the church is discerning where God's Spirit is during this mass exodus.

Are the millions of Christians who are leaving the church running away from God's Spirit? Or are they embarking on a journey into the unknown and the unfamiliar in an attempt to reconnect with God's Spirit and renew their faith and spiritual life?

Could it be, at least for some people, that the church has come to represent the bondage of Egypt, and the Holy Spirit is the one beckoning them into the wilderness to worship their true God? What a sobering thought—that God's Spirit might be saying to us, the church, "Let

[E]qually important to my faith and spiritual growth is being part of a community, experiencing togetherness, spiritual friendship and serving others. But do we need church for this?

my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness" (Exodus 7:16)

For many ex-churchgoers, the Divine Spirit has literally called them into the wilderness, into nature, away from all the noise, consumerism and busyness of work, life and church, to be still and know God. I empathize with this. As I get older, spending time in solitude surrounded by nature has become essential to my own spiritual well-being and sanity. Of course, equally important to my faith and spiritual growth is being part of a community, experiencing togetherness, spiritual friendship and serving others. But do we need church for this? I

suppose that depends on how we define church.

So what makes a community a church? Do we have to sing together? Do we have to gather on Sundays? Does everyone have to believe the same doctrine?

I believe many of our current versions of church will become extinct during the 21st century. As a pastor who makes his living through the current church paradigm, I may very well belong to one of these extinct versions of church. On some levels, this concerns me, but my faith in God gives me the courage to let go of my desire for certainty, security and familiarity, and to be willing to follow where the Spirit is moving.

My calling is, among other things, to be attuned to God's Spirit and to help others enter into deeper communion with the Divine Spirit. So if that means blessing people who leave the church to reconnect with God in the wilderness, I will. But I also hope I'm part of a church and denomination that is actively creating new opportunities for more people to attune themselves to the Divine Spirit

in empowering ways and is willing to be honest about how our current forms, beliefs and practices hinder us in this.

Donald Miller recently asked a question in a follow-up post on his blog: "If the Holy Spirit were pastor of a church, what would that church look like?"

These are the kinds of questions we need to be asking. Because if the focus of the church becomes the church, I'm not sure I want to help it survive. ❧

Troy Watson is pastor of the Quest Community in St. Catharines, Ont. This article is part of a series on "Spirit attunement."

Where are the young worshippers?

Regular church attendance dropping among youth, young adults

BY RACHEL BERGEN

Young Voices Co-editor



Megan Enns

What are your church attendance patterns like? Special occasions only? Once every couple of months? Every other week? Every Sunday?

If your attendance has become less frequent over the last few years, you are not alone. Statistics show young people aren't attending religious services as frequently as they did 20 years ago.

According to a Statistics Canada General Social Survey (<http://bit.ly/1ebFhRY>) in 1995, 15- to 24-year-olds were the least likely, at 22.6 percent, to attend religious ceremonies frequently, or once a week. This age group was also the most likely to attend church less frequently than once a week, at 55 percent. And less than a quarter

Mennonite Central Committee Alberta as a factor.

"Because I do so many weekend events, trips and visit other churches, that significantly affects my attendance at my own church," she says. "But it's also my choice not to attend very regularly."

Enns values community in her life. Although she says she does find it at Foothills, she feels supported and motivated by the community of faith in her work environment and through her group of friends as well. And while she's been involved with her church as a youth sponsor and a mentor, Enns doesn't believe attending church is the only way to support others or feel supported by a community

'My alarm clock would go off and I would be like, "Nope, not happening," and would go back to sleep.'
(Jennifer Regehr)



Jennifer Regehr

of 25- to 44-year-olds attended church once a week in 1995, while 50 percent attended less frequently.

A decade later, those numbers had dropped. Just over 15 percent of 15- to 24-year-olds attended at least once a week; just over half attended less frequently. Just under 16 percent of 25- to 44-year-olds attended once a week, while 48.2 percent of this demographic attended less frequently.

Megan Enns, 25, of Foothills Mennonite Church in Calgary, is one of those young people who doesn't attend her church very regularly, citing her work as a peace and youth engagement coordinator for

of faith.

"They're available at church, but I have them elsewhere," she says of her spiritual support. "Church isn't the one place I get them."

On the other hand, some young Mennonites still try to attend church every week.

Jennifer Regehr, 26, attends Erb Street Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ont., as often as she can.

"I think that creating a habit of doing something affects the way you think about things," she says. "Creating a habit of regular [church] attendance reinforces

the importance of Christianity in my life.”

Regehr admits that it was more difficult to attend church regularly when she was a student at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont.

“When I was at university I attended less regularly because my sleep schedule was messed up,” she says. “My alarm clock would go off and I would be like, ‘Nope, not happening,’ and would go back to sleep. . . . It’s better now that I have a 9-to-5 job, so my sleep schedule is somewhere approaching normal,” noting, though, that she still made an effort to make it to church as often as she could during her university years.

James Dueckman, 23, is a member of Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Abbotsford, B.C. He is a medical student at the University of British Columbia and lives in Vancouver. Although he doesn’t always make it home for church on Sunday, he does worship with a congregation in Vancouver.

For Dueckman, church and community are synonymous, which is why he prioritizes regular attendance. “At Emmanuel, all my friends growing up were there. And in the last couple of years, all my really good Abbotsford friends are there every Sunday.”

When he’s in Vancouver, Dueckman attends church with his roommate. Both are very busy, so church is a good place for them to spend time together.

Dueckman says, though, that his

attendance may drop when he gets into his third and fourth years of medical school, and his schedule becomes less predictable. Currently he’s able to get most of his work done during the week and on Saturday.

Gordon Zerbe, a New Testament professor at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, believes young people’s infrequent church attendance can result from a number of things, including the fact that young adults are more transient than ever.

“The duration of the in-between zone between coming of age and becoming an adult is now longer,” he says, adding that young adults often have difficulty getting settled into a career, and often have to get more education in order to reach their career goals. They are also getting married and having children later, and are generally taking longer to reach “adulthood” than their parents and grandparents did.

In his experience, Zerbe says that, when young adults become settled, their church attendance becomes more regular. And when the roles of young people are re-imagined in the church, these people respond well.

“My daughter was invited to be chair of our church’s Youth and Young Adult Committee,” Zerbe says. “Young adults are supposed to be the babysitters, but to give it another angle was a draw for her, like the church was taking her input seriously. It put her in a place of responsibility and helped her take ownership of her role in the church.” ❧



James Dueckman

Being a light wherever you are

Cara Baergen uses her gifts as an engineer to make a difference in the world

BY AARON EPP

Young Voices Co-editor

Ask Cara Baergen what an average workday looks like for her, and she replies that there is no such thing as “average” these days.

Day-to-day operations have yet to start

at the advanced energy research facility where Baergen works as a process engineer. Once it is up and running, the facility—owned by the City of Edmonton and

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