

When Christians Quit Church

An alarming number of Christians are staying home on Sunday mornings. Charisma researched how this trend is affecting today's church.

Lynn loves God, praises His name, studies His Word, serves His people and helps build His kingdom. She just can't be bothered to go to His house anymore.

The Spirit-filled believer who spends many of her working days at Christian conferences is more likely to be found slumbering on Sunday mornings—or washing her clothes.

"I'm sick of hearing pastors talking for themselves," she admits candidly. "I don't want to go and hear the same thing I did last week, sing the three fast, the three slow. ... I just don't want to spend 3-1/2 hours at church. I prefer to sleep in, do my laundry or prepare for the next week."

Lynn is in good company. Thousands like her who by all litmus tests would be gauged as devout, even zealous, Christians are voting with their feet and becoming "stayaway saints."

"It's not like I'm backsliding," she cautions, describing her daily commute prayer-and-praise sessions in her car. "Only people with a religious spirit who think you have to be 'in church' say that. I just have a hard time with the routine of it. ... It's not fresh."

The Stayaway Saints

Lynn is part of a growing trend that is alternately worrying

and exciting church leaders, pointing to what is being seen as either a serious threat to the spread of the gospel or the actual cusp of a revolution that could usher in the sort of revival many have prayed for and dreamed of for years.

These stayaway saints are not just the Bedside Baptists of the old joke. The movement transcends denominations and is as likely to include in its number Pillowtop Pentecostals, Comforter Charismatics or Eiderdown Evangelicals.

A Charisma investigation has also dispelled some other myths about Christians who are part of this trend. They are not necessarily postmodern 20-somethings rejecting anything of their parents' generation, nor are they grudge-bearing grumpies carrying an offense from a previous church life.

Although the leaders we spoke with agreed that stayaway saints are a significant movement, they were hard-pressed to back their definite view with data—citing instead widespread anecdotal evidence.

Perhaps the closest there is to hard proof is a recent study by The Barna Group, a California-based Christian research organization. It found that about 13 million Americans whom the researchers identified as being born again were “unchurched ... not having attended a Christian church service, other than for a holiday ... at any time in the past six months.”

According to senior Barna researcher David Kinnaman, their work suggests that the number of nonchurchgoing Christians has stayed fairly constant over the last 10 years. But many other observers see the figure increasing—like Thom Rainer, dean of

the Billy Graham School of Evangelism, Missions and Church Growth in Louisville, Kentucky. He says the few denominations that closely track membership and attendance statistics are observing a widening gap between the two groups.

Revival historian and teacher Andrew Strom found painful evidence of “a worldwide phenomenon.” After speaking on radio about what he has dubbed the “Out of Church Christians,” and writing about them in one of his e-newsletters, he was bombarded with responses from people around the world telling him, “Me too.”

He found “people leaving the church in droves,” he says.

“It got so bad, I got carpal tunnel problems trying to answer them all,” Strom told Charisma. “I was really surprised by the response. It told me this was no longer a small thing—it had become much bigger.”

David Barrett, author of the World Christian Encyclopedia, estimates there are about 112 million “churchless Christians” worldwide. He projects that number will double by 2025—though it includes both nominal believers and those part of underground churches in nations where they face persecution for their faith.

An English newspaper noted the stayaway saints trend last year, observing how many young people were saying “Yes to Jesus: No to Church.” In Switzerland, Reinhold Scharnowski, a coordinator and facilitator with the DAWN (Discipling a Whole Nation) European Network, fears the “churchless Christians” he has seen emerging are “an endangered species.”

“They can be alone and die a very soft, comfortable death,” he explains.

In Holland, a survey conducted last year by the Dutch Bible Association found that only 33 percent of the population considered themselves to be part of a church—down from 50 percent in 1996.

Half Empty or Half Full?

If the movement is virulent in Europe, then in the United States, where church attendance has for decades been proportionally much higher than across the Atlantic, it has reached epidemic proportions, some believe.

Concern about the growing number of Christians she had met who no longer attended church regularly prompted Pat Palau, wife of international evangelist Luis Palau, to collaborate last year on a book, *What to Do When You Don't Want to Go to Church* (AMG Publishers).

Ted Haggard, senior pastor of 11,000-strong New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and president of the National Association of Evangelicals, sees the abandonment of regular churchgoing as more than just a personal preference.

“It’s a huge problem in the fulfillment of the Great Commission because God is the one who established the local church as His primary method of discipling people. So we lose the united prayer support, the financial strength, the missionary efforts,” he warns.

In some cases, although skipping church isn't caused by a crisis of faith, it can lead to one.

"They know the church is not incidental to being a Christian," observes Todd Hunter, former national director of the Vineyard movement and now president of Alpha USA, a discussion-group evangelism ministry. "They think, How can I be a Christian if I really have this problem with the church?"

Far more of them, however, report a continually vibrant faith.

"It's better to be real with the Lord than go to church and play the holier-than-thou church game everyone plays there," Douglas told Strom, who says the dropout saints he interviewed talk about finding deep fellowship with a few other believers.

Feelings of connection are harder to measure than church attendance, though, and Rainer for one wonders how that sense of spirituality translates into practice. "I don't believe [stayaways] are generally as consistent in prayer and Bible study and the Christian disciplines," he says.

And even though Jesus says He is in the midst when two or three gather in His name, something happens that can't be explained when more come together intentionally, says Bill Effler, a former Presbyterian pastor who is now professor of pastoral studies at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee.

"The church is to be a school where people are educated, and if the Word is rightly being divided and presented in a biblical way, with challenges that lead to transformed lives ... if people aren't in church they will miss that," he suggests.

He acknowledges that some may argue they find meaningful Christian community with a couple of friends in the local coffee shop, but questions: "Will somebody feel free to be 'undone' in Starbucks if the Spirit touches them deeply?"

Searching for Answers

Observers trace several factors behind the trend. They point to the way the increasing fragility and mobility of the family has weakened the "brand loyalty" that historically meant children grew up with a strong sense of connection to the church of their parents.

They also see the church-dropout wave as a barometer of the influence of the wider culture's me-centered nature as well as the unfortunate excesses of the "seeker-sensitive" movement that has aimed to make church less intimidating to people with no religious heritage.

Says Larry Lewis, national facilitator of denominations for Mission America: "There's a consumer mentality that says I go to church not to give anything or to be challenged or instructed, but to be helped, and there's a tendency to turn the prophetic message and its challenge into the ear-tickling messages of self-help lectures with very little biblical content.

"You can't reduce ministry to that," he adds. "We have a prophetic role that we must fulfill if we are to be true to our calling. ... I can't imagine Nehemiah or Job or Amos going down the street with a clipboard in hand and asking, 'What do you want us to preach about?'"

"It's a biblical fallacy to say we don't need church," Rainer comments. "The New Testament pattern is very clear—that there was some type of formal gathering of believers on a regular basis who had accountability to one another. I quite frankly don't buy that church can be anywhere."

But even those with serious concerns about the results of so many Christians bailing on church commitment see a potential silver lining in it—if, rather than just deciding that they don't like what church is, those leaving get serious about what they think it should be.

"I'm happy that people are asking the questions," Hunter says. "I'm sad that it is keeping them away from church."

Steve and Ellen, who say they felt led to leave their Spirit-filled church after more than 20 years, believe there is a growing "new counterculture of the disaffected and unsatisfied ... looking for something authentic, a real expression of the kingdom of God."

They are still in touch with friends from their former church but now take Sundays as they come—recently hosting guests, going on a retreat, hunting and praying for the U.S. national elections on consecutive weekends. "We are just out here trying to be obedient to God," they said. "[He] is breaking us of reliance on anything other than Him. We are the broken, the needy, the helpless."

From his studies of the phenomenon, Strom sees not just a bunch of belligerent, AWOL worshipers but "a grass-roots hunger for change in the church, for reality ... more than the latest church-growth stuff or conference."

“They want to see revival, not some latest fad that sweeps through the church,” he says.

With his own passion to see revival—Strom moved to the United States from his native New Zealand last year because his study of past revivals convinced him America is on the brink of a major move of God—he sees a divine work amid the discontent.

“The surprising thing is that they are often the most committed Christians—praying, insightful, deep-thinking,” he wrote in his online book, *The “Out of Church” Christians*. “Most have not given up on Christianity ... [but on] today’s church system.”

He is emphatic, though, that true revival will come only through the body of Christ, not a bunch of go-it-aloners. He is also worried that some will become spiritual elitists, looking down on others who remain in the traditional church.

Informal Spirituality

Proponents welcome the stayaway saints trend for breaking from traditional models of church that they say are often weighted down by traditions and trappings that stifle individuality and creativity. The new forms, they say, are equally attractive to Christians tired of what they have known and newcomers with no religious background. They believe the new kinds of informal “church” challenge widely and strongly held notions of professional leadership and allow more room for ordinary believers to become involved in personal ministry.

Bob and his wife, Kelly, say they realized after years of

children's ministry involvement in a 5,000-plus-member charismatic church that they never truly felt a sense of community or belonging. Finding a small, informal house church, they "went from being lonely and burned out to feeling community, passion, authenticity and best of all like we were again learning more about the gospel."

They see many more following in their steps, requiring "more leaders to step up and lead groups and shepherd people. It will mean more bi-vocational pastors that are out in the real world surrounded by the 'missing'—we don't say the 'lost'—and not surrounded by Christians."

Jim Henderson, a former pastor who himself checked out of church for a period, now leads a network of believers exploring new ways of looking at evangelism and discipleship. He says that instead of being a mission that reached out to others, the church had too often become an institution that served itself.

"People have not been engaged in the mission much beyond turning up and writing checks," he observes.

Slick services and programs at churches with sizeable budgets are similarly disdained by many 20-somethings who want "authenticity" and "connection" over a professional presentation they dismiss as shallow religious entertainment, says 28-year-old publisher Cameron Strang.

His Relevant Media Group magazine and books champion many of the questions and criticisms his generation is raising about the church, but he—like a surprising number in his constituency who when polled said they still attended services

even though they felt they were going through the motions—isn't prepared to turn his back just yet.

"The Bible is clear about not forsaking fellowship with other believers," he says, though underscoring that what "fellowship" might look like as the 21st century unfolds could be very different from traditional forms.

"We don't want people to give up on church, but they are at that teetering point. We are trying to keep them in the fold," Strang explains. "If the church really is to be an instrument of change, we don't think the answer is to walk out the back door. We are trying to challenge people to work from within."

That includes providing an online forum in which Relevant Media readers can recommend vibrant congregations around the country, and sending regular "food packages" of materials that explore new church forms to leaders grappling with these questions.

But the discontent is not limited by age. Henderson notes many of his generation who, having attended faithfully as an example to their kids, think because the children have grown and left the nest that they don't have to be the regular-attendee role model anymore: "There's a lot of really tired Boomers out there."

Pat Palau sees affluence as a real problem, too, with older people often choosing a weekend at their second home over another Sunday morning in their local church. "Fifty is a dangerous age," she says, citing the couple who told her proudly one day they had been attending the church seven years but had "worked really hard to stay under the radar screen."

Although the call for more involvement troubled that pair, more typically it's the lack of demand for it that drives people out, Rainer says. Research he conducted for one large church "was clear that the more the church expected, the more people were likely to attend. The less that was expected, the less they were likely to go."

He comments: "We have dumbed down the church so much to the point there are Christians asking, 'Why do I want to be part of something that means so little?' Research proves it."

Some point to the phenomenal success of Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*, a step-by-step call to active Christian involvement that has moved 20 million copies over the last couple of years, making it the best-selling book in the country, as further evidence that believers want their lives to count for something.

"Spiritual interest is at an all-time high," says Lewis, noting the social impact of *The Passion of the Christ*. But he adds that "there's a sense that the church is not relevant and not meeting their needs."

What distresses those on both sides of the issue is that, for the most part, churches are more concerned about getting new people in through the front doors than finding out why, once inside, many are leaving through the rear exit.

"Church leadership doesn't even recognize they are gone," Effler says. "If they don't show up, they just look to replace them with someone else."

TV sports director Dave Burchett, a former Presbyterian now

involved in planting an independent church in Dallas, interviewed many church leavers for his book *Bring 'Em Back Alive* (WaterBrook Press). It discusses how to draw what he calls the “wounded sheep”—hurt ex-attenders—back to the fold.

“The bottom line is this—[church] is the way God has instituted it, and we need to find a way to leave our pride outside and make our differences work,” Burchett says.

Lynn seems to recognize that. She recently started attending church again on Sundays when she doesn't feel like she has a reasonable excuse—which, in her book, could be weariness or washing.

Churches miss out financially and in acts of service when people drop out, she acknowledges. “If the trend continues,” Lynn notes, “there will be generations missing in the church.”

A Safe Place for Wounded Christians

John Moore's alternative church attracts people from a vast rural area.

Even in rural Montana, 90 miles is a long way to drive to find fellowship, but that's how far people travel to be part of Safe Place, the informal home church led by writer and prophetic minister John Moore. About half those who attend the Thursday night meetings—scheduled then to avoid clashing with regular service times of churches in the area—are not part of a traditional congregation.

At Moore's ranch home they find “more of an equipping center

for ministry than a traditional church,” he says. “Our desire is to [create] a little refuge where people can come out of the worldly systems, both religious and secular, to be equipped to go back into the culture and society.”

Moore has no doubt that the “stayaway saints” phenomenon is growing, especially among those with prophetic or intercessory gifts. “Pastors have more trouble understanding them than any other group,” he says. “They tend to be women and have many dreams and visions, and pastors are often a little bit more left-brained, more pragmatic. They tend to be a little cynical or suspicious of people with lots of dreams and visions.”

Though some who have found their way to Safe Place—which relies on word-of-mouth to bring the people who should be there—have had negative experiences with churches, there is a “leave your baggage at the door” philosophy.

“We are not interested in people that are bitter about the system,” Moore says. He sees David’s cave of Adullam as a prototype for his group. “They were disaffected, but they didn’t stay in there forever. You may have to retreat to go out again, but you have to come back into the light and have a servant’s heart.”

Making church a healthy place

Pastor Ted Haggard says the secret of keeping people in church is in making it ‘life-giving.’

Though he is concerned about church dropouts, Ted Haggard is sympathetic.

“Churches are such hostile places,” he acknowledges as one of

the reasons for the trend. The 20 percent of U.S. churches that are growing have “efficient church government,” he contends. The rest are “bogged down in old-fashioned systems that are a waste of time, making mountains out of molehills.”

He broke the old mold when founding New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, some 20 years ago. It grew from a small group in his basement to an 11,000-strong megachurch. Sharing what he has learned with others through his Association of Life-Giving Churches, he sees wider cultural forces at play in the way things have changed.

“We run into people all the time who have stopped going to church, even though they love the Scriptures and love the Lord.”

As president of the National Association of Evangelicals, Haggard often represents a broad swath of the American church to the national media. He believes pastors have been the reason many have left the church. “They have been let down by church leaders whose children are wild and disobedient or who are in adulterous marriages,” he says.

Though some church dropouts are finding new expressions of church life, which he welcomes, he does not believe the answer is to bury the institutional church. “We need to get it healthy and dynamic,” he says. “There’s no mystery to that—just as there’s no mystery about how to have a healthy marriage and wonderful children.”

Exit Interviews

A Christian sociologist says we can learn a lot from

Christians who leave church.

They're not backsliders, but they're not typical disciples, either, so what do you call committed Christians who don't turn out for the usual Sunday morning services anymore? Post-congregationals, says Alan Jamieson, who has done some of the most serious research on the movement to date.

A sociologist and pastor at charismatic Wellington Central Baptist Church in the New Zealand capital, he began to study the phenomenon 10 years ago after seeing youth-group members drift away and recognizing his own growing dissatisfaction with church life as it was. He discovered that, far from being people on the fringes of the church, most of those opting out had been heavily involved. More than 90 percent of those he tracked had been in some sort of leadership role, and almost 33 percent were former pastors.

Jamieson also identified four main reasons why people leave a church—cultural preferences, personal factors such as broken relationships, disagreements over doctrine and changing stages in their faith development.

This last area, he says, is especially important in Pentecostal and charismatic churches, which “are very good at attracting younger people and introducing them to Christian faith and God, but not so good at helping them to work through normal later-faith development.”

Jamieson sees something “very positive” in the movement, for some. “Some of the leavers make the best leaders in church life down the track,” he comments. He also sees God “sponsoring a return to the deserts of personal faith and

encouraging new supports for such a faith.”

His church started a Spirited Exchange meeting, where people can meet to discuss faith-related topics in a nonchurch setting. He believes churches that ignore the “stayaway saints” are missing something very significant.

“In the commercial world companies learn a lot from past customers who leave them,” he notes. “Surely we in the church can do the same thing. Historically, the church has made some major moves from this kind of marginal listening.” *

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