

The Great Dechurching

Session One – Who Are the Dechurched?

INTRODUCTION

Two pastors of a large church in Orlando, Florida worked with a political science professor at Eastern Illinois University to address what they call The Great Dechurching. The fact is that 40 million members have left the church in the last 25 years. They write, "More people have left the church in the last 25 years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening and Billy Graham crusades combined."

The trend has impacted every congregation, hitting every age category, from evangelicals to Catholics to mainline Protestants. The median congregation in the United States now has 65 people, down from 137 two decades ago. About 15% of Americans are "dechurched." This does not mean they are not Christian. It does not mean they have lost their faith or have been kicked out of church. No, statistically it means that they used to attend a service of worship at least once a month, and now they attend less than once a year.

Pastor Jack has spoken with pastors within our United Methodist denomination and others from large mega churches with multiple campuses and small mainline churches. The question is the same, "Where have all the people gone?"

FIVE PROFILES OF THE DECHURCHED

Cultural Christians

This is the largest of the profiled groups at 52% of all dechurched evangelicals. They are averaged age of 50, apathetic and demonstrate very little evidence that they are Christian. They are at the lower end of orthodoxy; orthodoxy for the purpose of this study is defined as adherence to the bare essentials of the Christian faith expressed in the Nicene Creed.

Cultural Christians were most religious during their late twenties, are at the high end of education and income. Institutions, such as the

government, economy, education system, media and health care work well for them. They are centered at the political left being moderately prochoice, support vaccine mandates for teachers, aren't aggressive on foreign military intervention, want increased gun control and are concerned about Climate Change.

The reasons this group left the church are social and experiential. Many have had negative experience of church. Over half of Cultural Christians are willing to come back to church now if invited. They want healthy churches that teach the Bible as well as creeds and confessions. They also desire fellowship with members who are equipped to engage their contexts with relational wisdom.

Dechurched Mainstream Evangelicals

This group is different from the others profiled in terms of having the highest orthodoxy score. Their average age is 40 as compared to the average age of 50 for Mainstream Evangelicals that still attend church. They are typically more progressive than their church attending counterparts but still right of center.

Most have left church because of life circumstances and inconvenience: Covid-19, travel sports, divorce, a new baby, moving their home. These dechurched people have better mental health than their church attending counterparts. This group dropped out of church around 2020.

100% of Dechurched Mainstream Evangelicals are willing to return to an evangelical church. There are four avenues of return: 1) social on-ramp of making new friends or a spouse that wants to return to church, 2) the church on-ramp of missing church or finding a good church or pastor, 3) the God on-ramp of hearing from God or lamenting distance from God and 4) philosophy of ministry on-ramp of finding a church that takes doctrine and ethics seriously or one that prioritizes justice and compassion for the vulnerable.

Exvangelicals

This group comprises 17% of dechurched evangelicals and is described as dechurched casualties. Exvangelicals are 82% white, 13% Black and 2% Hispanic. They are 65% female and 35% male. They are primarily dechurched over twenty years ago (2003). They are politically independent with political affiliation at center-left. While they are concerned about

progressive issues they are critical of socialism, democratic socialism, Marxism and communism.

100% of Exvangelicals will never return to an evangelical church but surprisingly, they are the second most orthodox subgroup of the dechurched spectrum. American institutions do not work well for Exvangelicals (marriage, police and democracy). They are also victims of the church failing them; they have fallen through the cracks feeling left behind relationally, socially, politically to name a few examples.

Exvangelicals have not felt love within congregations and have negative experiences in evangelical churches. Dechurching accelerates for this group in their teens and twenties. While they are not willing to return to an evangelical church, if a church and clergy were willing to be attentive to exvangelicals, they may respond to fresh expressions of the Christian faith.

Dechurched BIPOC

BIPOC stands for "Black, Indigenous and People of Color. The research model for this study did not create an algorithm for ethnicity or race, however, this group of dechurched people emerged nonetheless. This overwhelmingly male group has chosen to worship in likely white evangelical contexts.

While this group is the smallest subgroup, the men are by far the most educated and affluent of any of the dechurched categories. They also represent the highest employment rate of the subgroups and their average age is 52.

The complexity of this group is interesting and difficult to process. A composite profile included the influence of American descendants of slaves, Afro-Caribbean and white cultural spaces. It is surprising that this group feel that "racial problems in the US are rare, isolated situations."

This high functioning subgroup has lowest scores for mental health indicators. This may be connected to generational discontinuity and mistrust. This group dechurched in the early 2000's usually during times of transition (graduations, moving into their professions, etc.).

65% of BIPOC would be willing to return to the evangelical church. They are primarily interested in relational issues within the church desiring a sense of belonging.

Dechurched Mainline Protestants and Catholics

This is us as United Methodists! It is a surprising finding of this study that there are little differences between Protestants and Catholics in this profile. This group has a lower view of the Bible than any other group. There is not a high correlation between faith and our scripture.

The reasons for this group leaving the church are not so different from the Cultural Christians (moving to a new community, other priorities and not fitting in). They also have a low orthodoxy score similar to the Cultural Christians. The dechurched of this group started in the 1970's.

This group's return to the church is related to the churches interaction with the world. They desire strong social programs, followed by strong educational programs and activities focused on dialogue.

CONCLUSIONS AND SURPRISES

Dechurched began with mainline protestant churches then moved on to Catholic and is now an evangelical phenomenon.

Increase education decreases the likelihood of dechurched.

Politically, dechurched evangelicals lean center-right whereas mainline and Catholic counterparts lean center-left.

Most groups will tune out those who have difficulty separating their faith and politics, especially in the vein of Christian nationalism, xenophobia, misogyny, culture warring and the prosperity gospel.

Engaging the dechurched is complex but not impossible. And that will be the focus of our next meeting!