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**Sociologists reveal why people are  
DONE with church but not their faith**

**JOSH PACKARD, PH.D. and ASHLEIGH HOPE**



# CHURCH REFUGEES

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Loveland, CO

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Interior: Andy Towler

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## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Packard, Josh.

Church refugees : sociologists reveal why people are done with church but not their faith / Josh Packard, Ph.D. and Ashleigh Hope. -- First American hardcover.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-4707-2791-8 (hardcover) -- ISBN 978-1-4707-2592-1 (softcover)

1. Ex-church members. I. Hope, Ashleigh, 1993- II. Title.

BV4921.3.P33 2015

262--dc23

2015005788

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ISBN 978-1-4707-2791-8 (hardcover)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2      24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-4707-2592-1 (softcover)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2      24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15

Printed in the United States of America

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As academics, we don't often get to write for a general audience, but I was cheered on by my fantastic colleagues at the University of Northern Colorado and friends and mentors Dr. Richard Pitt at Vanderbilt University and Dr. George Sanders at Oakland University. My wife, Megan, who has never read a word of anything I've written, never needs to, as far as I'm concerned. Her influence is felt throughout this project. I couldn't ask for a better partner in life, and our son couldn't ask for a better mother.

I couldn't have written this book without Ashleigh Hope. Indeed, this project may very well have sat on my shelf for many more years if she hadn't come along and asked for some work to do. She's a once-in-a-lifetime student whom I'm proud to have as a colleague. There are, no doubt, more great things to come from her.

—Josh Packard

I would like to thank my Savior for making all things new and continuing the good works he's begun within me. Additionally, I'm grateful for my beloved husband, Kyle, for encouraging me in this research and all others. His support and insight have been invaluable.

—Ashleigh Hope

We would both like to express our gratitude for the amazing team at Group Publishing. They've been invaluable. Thom Schultz's willingness to meet with us following an unsolicited email is behavior not normally associated with presidents of large companies. He and his wife, Joani, have championed this project from the beginning. The concept of the refugee as a metaphor first came up in conversations with Amy Nappa, and the writing and publishing process was demystified and smoothed out by an extraordinary group of professionals at Group Publishing consisting of Craig Cable, Mikal Keefer, Becky Hodges, and Candace McMahan, among others.

Finally, we're both deeply indebted to all who shared their stories for this research. Their honesty and vulnerability made this book possible.

## FOREWORD

A few years ago, in the course of collecting data for a different project, I (Josh) had the occasion to talk with some church planters and ministry resource leaders over lunch. In some way or another, they all wanted to know why so many people were leaving the church. Finally, one relatively new pastor asked the group, “So what’s different about this era that so many people are leaving the church? What happened?”

As I began to formulate some kind of answer based on all of my recently completed graduate schooling in sociology, Jessica, a woman who had been working in ministry-resource publication for over two decades, spoke up: “Nothing. People have always been leaving the church. It’s just that now they’re not coming back. That’s the real issue. We’re doing things that drive people away from the church. *We’re* the problem. We’ve dechurched them. They’re done with us.”

Jessica’s words hung over the table for a few seconds that felt like hours before I broke the uneasy silence by asking, “So, what do you all think? Is Jessica right? Of the people you know who’ve left, do you think they’re coming back? Do you know why they left?”

One by one, they all revealed that, indeed, they didn’t think any of the people who had left their congregations would be coming back with the exception of a general and vague hope that young people going off to college would eventually return. Instead, they related story after story of people who had left their congregations after prolonged struggle, searching, and sometimes incredibly harmful and divisive experiences.

As they recounted the reasons people had given them for leaving their churches, I heard about pastors behaving poorly; churches focused so much on buildings and infrastructure that they neglected the outside world; unwanted and distracting political stances; perceived persecution over issues of gender and sexuality; hypocrisy; and many, many stories about judgment.

They weren’t recounting the transgressions of an anonymous church down the street or of friends who pastor congregations in other towns. These were stories that pastors and other church leaders were telling about their own congregations. These were things that happened on their watch, despite their best intentions. It remains, several years later, among the most revealing moments I’ve ever encountered in my research.

Aside from being heartbroken to hear these stories of hurt, disillusionment, and bitterness at the hands of trusted people in a trusted institution, I was intrigued sociologically. What, for example, did Jessica mean by “dechurched”? Who are these people—the “Dones”—and how do they make the decision to leave the church? Does their leaving accompany a loss of faith in God or a change in religious affiliation? Furthermore, how can we understand the institutional forces that seemingly work to compel poor behavior from a group of well-meaning pastors working in organizations with the explicit mission to be loving, just, and compassionate?

As so often happens in the course of research, these questions weren’t central to the project I was working on at the time, and so I filed them away, but they were never far from my mind. As I began teaching Sociology of Religion courses on a regular basis, I heard more and more stories similar to the ones those religious leaders had told me. Typically, students would recount their negative experiences with organized religion after class or during office hours as we worked to apply a particular theory or reconcile some empirical evidence we’d been reading with our own personal experiences.

Again and again, I returned to this concept of the dechurched and the Dones, and increasingly, my own students were using it to describe their experiences. In the midst of these thoughts, my research assistant, Ashleigh Hope, approached me and said, “We should really look into this. Why is church so bad to some people? And more important sociologically, what happens to our society if this central institution continues to drive people away?”

This book was born out of those questions. Primarily, we’re interested in understanding precisely what it means to be “done” with organized religion, uncovering its effect on the institution of religion, beginning to assess what social forces are driving this trend, and what it means for the future of such a historically important institution in the United States.

More personally, we have a heart for the church and want it to succeed, though we aren’t particularly sympathetic to any specific form of church, institutional or otherwise.

So this book is best understood as an amalgamation of those two impulses. It’s an accounting of the dechurched phenomenon from sociologists who apply our understanding of social theory to explain why people are increasingly done with organized religion, what it means for churches across this country, and what can be done about it.

# A NOTE ABOUT THE RESEARCH

## THE PROJECT'S BIRTH

This project, like all good social science, started with a question. Quite simply, we kept hearing stories of people who were disengaging with church but not with God. We wanted to know why this was happening and what the process of disengagement looked like.

Of course, we had lots of hypotheses when we started out. For a while we thought maybe the answer had something to do with generations. We kept hearing about the rise of the “Nones” (those who claim no religious affiliation) and thought that this might be a part of that story, which is very much a generational phenomenon.

We read through our sociology of religion literature and were also working with a hypothesis that the rise of the dechurched, the people we would come to call the Dones, was somehow connected to the dominance of conservative Christian theology. We thought maybe the dechurched were the more theologically liberal who couldn't find a home in the church.

We also had good reason to believe that the poor behavior of pastors and other church leaders (clergy molesting children, youth directors embezzling funds, pastors cheating on spouses, and so on) was exposing a level of moral corruption that was driving people away.

As it turns out, none of these hypotheses was correct. Instead, it became clear to us that the story of the dechurched was a story of modern religious organizations and institutions stifling people's ability to engage with each other and their communities.

## OUR METHODS

Many people have inquired about our research methods. As researchers, we love the fact that people are consuming data and information critically, and we invite these conversations and affirm the impulse to be critical consumers. In the following pages, we outline our general approach and defend some of our more important choices. If you find yourself



with additional questions, we are more than happy to explain further. You may reach us at [www.dechurched.net](http://www.dechurched.net) or via our Twitter account, @DechurchAmerica or at [josh.packard@unco.edu](mailto:josh.packard@unco.edu).

The research for this book was conducted between January 2013 and July 2014. The research design, protocol, and instruments were crafted to the highest academic standards and rigor and were passed through the Institutional Review Board at the University of Northern Colorado. In accordance with those standards, the identifying details of the individuals, congregations, and places in this book have been altered. While demographic data such as region, age, and gender remain unchanged, pseudonyms have been assigned to each person in the study.

One of the questions we're frequently asked is about our statistics, or the lack thereof. People are used to seeing numbers to explain the world around us. But numbers tell us very little, if anything, about people's experiences, interpretations, and processes. As we honed our research questions, it became clear that a survey that would generate numbers and statistics would be virtually impossible for two primary reasons.

First, the dechurched, by their nature, don't gather together regularly or belong to the same kinds of organizations. It would make the things necessary for a scientifically valid survey, such as random sampling, unfeasible without first understanding the basic characteristics of the group.

Second, based on the wildly varied hypotheses we came up with, it was evident that we couldn't even begin to construct survey questions that would accurately account for all of the potential answers someone might give to any one question. We were worried that an attempt to squeeze people into selecting one of five or six options we provided wouldn't provide an accurate understanding of what it means to leave the church, why people leave, or how the process happens. For these reasons, then, we abandoned the idea of taking a quantitative approach and turned to qualitative methods as the appropriate way to get answers to our questions.

Future work in this area would do well to build on the findings presented here in pursuit of quantifiable evidence that can give full scope to this large and rapidly growing group of Christians.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research is particularly good for findings that require stories and conversations from participants. From the researcher, it requires discipline, forethought, and creativity to guide interviews in a way that stays on track with the research question without leading participants into answers.

We're thankful for the solid methodological foundations provided by sociological researchers working throughout the last century to hone in on sets of best practices and guidelines for gathering rigorous empirical data that can help us better understand social phenomena.

Additionally, we're thankful for the advent of modern qualitative analysis software that allowed us to analyze each of the interviews for key themes and evaluate all of the evidence together. In a project of this size, with over 1,000 pages of transcriptions, we simply couldn't have kept it all straight otherwise.

Each word and sentence of every interview was coded and analyzed according to classic principles in qualitative data analysis. The entire project was approved by the University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board and supported by several research grants. Results have been presented at several academic conferences, and a manuscript for an article in the academic *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* is in progress. In other words, while this particular manuscript has not been peer-reviewed, the data collection and analysis procedures and many of the results presented in these pages have held up to rigorous scientific review, and we're fully confident in the validity of the empirical research presented here.

As with any research, however, there are limits to our findings. First, and most important, this research gives no indication of the scope of the dechurched phenomenon. In other words, nothing in these pages can provide an indication of how many dechurched exist in the world, or in the United States.

But we can be confident in the key themes and processes identified in the following chapters. Our confidence is based on two primary factors. First, the remarkable consistency in our data and the diversity of our sample provide assurance that the themes we see in the data are not simply a coincidence.

Second, qualitative research generally relies on the principle of saturation when deciding how much data to collect. That is, when researchers reach the point where they keep seeing or hearing the same things again and again, that's a good sign that there is consistency and thus a general social pattern. However, we continued to collect data well past the point of saturation because we simply couldn't believe how consistently the data contradicted our initial hypotheses.

In short, if we were going to tell a counterintuitive story about the dechurched, we wanted to make sure we were right. As the theme of the stifling institutional structure emerged and the other hypotheses fell by the wayside, we decided we had to collect more data and actually began looking for cases to contradict this emerging pattern. Alas, the contradictory

case virtually never emerged and certainly not in a way that would suggest an alternative pattern.

## WHO ARE THE RESPONDENTS?

A number of people have also asked specifically about our sample and how we found and recruited participants. The issue of sampling qualitative research is somewhat more complicated than I think most people would expect, and our project is no exception.

First, it's important to understand how our sample was generated. We worked with the principles of snowball or chain-referral sampling. This relies on the idea that people who are dechurched are likely to come into contact with one another and share their stories with one another. At the end of each interview, we asked the participant to refer us to other people he or she knew who would fit the description of our research. Along the way, however, we were constantly checking our demographic information to make sure we weren't missing entire populations of people in ways that we thought would matter. For example, we didn't want a sample that contained no poor people because the literature in the sociology of religion has long shown that religious habits vary greatly by income and social class.

In order to achieve a diverse sample, we started our snowballs in places where we could expect to reach different audiences. Key points in our recruitment came when Thom Schultz, the president of Group Publishing, invited people to visit our website, [www.dechurched.net](http://www.dechurched.net), through a link on his Facebook page. Around that same time, we reached out to other pastors and people in ministry to help spread the word. Many of our early interviews came from those sources. Additionally, we both have long histories in the church and leveraged those contacts for some key early interviews that allowed us to test out some early hypotheses and ideas. Finally, as word about the project spread, we generated interest through our own Twitter, @DechurchAmerica, and sustained interviews for over 18 months resulting in nearly 100 in-depth interviews at the time of writing.

The result is a sample that is diverse geographically, socioeconomically (average household income is \$55,745), generationally (average age is 40 years old with a spread from 18 to 84 years old), and with regard to gender (56 percent female), but is racially homogenous. Our respondents are nearly all white (92 percent). However, we don't see anything in the data to contradict our conclusion that this is an issue of resources, not of race.

The story that emerged from the data is that people with access to alternative ways of reaching their goals of community and social engagement are opting out of church. In our society, this is typically white people

for issues of social class, not because of heritage, tradition, or ethnicity. White people in the U.S. have much greater access to social institutions and systems of power, so when they leave the church, they can find other ways of getting things done. Also, white people generally have much more social and cultural capital than other groups, making it more possible for them to realize their goals without a supporting institution.

The one caveat to this is probably with regard to African-Americans. Because of longstanding issues surrounding their forced migration, the African-American assimilation process has been uneven at best, and the church has come to play a defining role for many African-American communities as a source of identity. In this sense, then, the church plays a somewhat different role and is subject to different organizational dynamics. It would be impossible to speculate about how far the findings presented here would extend into the African-American church in America. Indeed, a full-scale study of this population is certainly warranted.

Additionally, we administered a validated scale of religious fundamentalism as early research into this area indicated that the nature of people's religious beliefs might impact their decision-making process in terms of attendance at religious events. The results of our analysis of this scale showed no distinct patterns. Not only did a roughly equal number of people fall at all points on the scale, but their answers on the scale were not predictive of their persistence in church or their pathways out of church.

If Ashleigh and I could communicate one thing about the demographics of the Dones, it would be that this is an issue of talents and energy, not of numbers. While we have strong suspicions about the rising numbers of Dones, this is, ultimately, not a story of numbers. It's a story of what happens when an organization invests in training and disciplining scores of people and yet does very little to retain them or reengage them when they leave.



# CHAPTER 1: THE DECHURCHED AS RELIGIOUS REFUGEES

## WHO ARE THE DECHURCHED?

This is a book about leaving the church. For years now, in the social sciences, we've had a pretty good grasp of the social forces that pattern people's religious lives. Clergy and academics alike are familiar with the more common patterns. Kids grow up in religious homes, go off to college, stop attending church regularly, but come back when they have their own children because of a belief that their kids should have some of the same religious upbringing. A woman moves to a new city because of a job promotion, never finds a church, and eventually stops looking. A man goes through a divorce and stops going to church to avoid his ex-wife.

On top of all of these patterns are the larger social forces that influence any given generation of churchgoers. The televangelist and clergy sex-abuse scandals of the 1980s influenced an entire decade of church attendance figures. Our changing economy over the last 50 years to include increasingly more shift labor makes regular Sunday morning attendance a challenge for many. The increasing diversity of our country makes it harder for one social group to lay claim to a particular day of the week where all other activity stops. When our kids' soccer games are scheduled for Sunday mornings, and work retreats, travel, and conferences extend through the weekend, regular church involvement becomes increasingly difficult.

Still, what most of these scenarios have in common is that they're tales of unintentional leaving. Other life circumstances and events got in the way of continued church attendance. If life had remained the same—if the child hadn't gone away to college, if the woman hadn't been promoted, if the man hadn't gotten divorced—they would all likely have remained in church. But this book isn't about them.

This book is about a wholly different kind of churchgoer. It's about people who make explicit and intentional decisions to leave the church

and organized religion. We call these people the dechurched or the Dones: They're done with church. They're tired and fed up with church. They're dissatisfied with the structure, social message, and politics of the institutional church, and they've decided they and their spiritual lives are better off lived outside of organized religion. As one of our respondents put it, "I guess the church just sort of churched the church out of me."

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**“I guess the church just sort of churched the church out of me.”**

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## THE STRUGGLE TO LEAVE

The dechurched typically struggle with the decision to leave for a long time. Some put up with spiritual abuse on a regular and repeated basis before finally leaving, and many are never fully comfortable with leaving even if they're sure that their decision to leave is the right one. Many, in fact, see leaving the church as the only way to save their faith.

In August 2013, Micah J. Murray, a popular religious blogger, expressed exactly these sentiments in his blog post “Why We Left the Church (Our Stories)”:

“Don't say that we left because we didn't want to follow Jesus, or because we're too consumeristic, or too selfish, or too sinful. The self-righteous assumptions and finger-pointing are a kick in the ribs to those already paralyzed by fear and aching doubt. Please don't do that.”

Mr. Murray's comments, which came after sharing numerous stories of people opting out of organized religion, sum up the central tensions and struggles of the dechurched. In short, leaving church is never an easy decision. You won't encounter a single story in this book of someone walking away from church on a whim or because of one bad experience. You won't hear that story because *we* didn't hear that story. If those stories exist, they're a small minority of experiences relative to the much more common tale of struggle and soul-searching over a prolonged period of time that typically precedes a decision to disengage with organized religion.

Churches are an institution that people identify with heavily in the United States. Even if trends in church attendance suggest a general decline in recent years, it remains a place of home and a central organizing identity for millions of Americans. For attendees, church serves some combination

of spiritual, social, and civic needs. At its best, church organizes people to do things together that they couldn't do alone. Leaving such a place, then, often means giving up social connections, activity groups, and—perhaps most important—taking on a certain amount of spiritual guilt. Nobody enthusiastically walks away from those things or eagerly embraces feelings of guilt and shame.

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## **Nobody enthusiastically walks away from those things or eagerly embraces feelings of guilt and shame.**

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With this struggle as a backdrop, we'll delve into the stories and the patterns behind those individual experiences in an effort to provide a more nearly complete picture of why people would choose to leave the church and how those decisions are made. Such decisions are always personal, but there are common threads running through them.

## **REFUGEES**

Refugees are people who've been forced from their homes—where they'd prefer to stay—for fear of persecution. That, in a nutshell, describes the dechurched. They feel they've been forced to leave a place they consider home because they feel a kind of spiritual persecution and it would be dangerous, spiritually, for them to remain. They tell stories of frustration, humiliation, judgment, embarrassment, and fear that caused them to leave the church. They remark time and again that they worked diligently for reform within the church but felt the church was exclusively focused on its own survival and resistant to change. If they stayed, they would risk further estrangement from their spiritual selves, from God, and from a religion they still believe in.

When considering the refugee metaphor for the dechurched, it's important to consider other metaphors for people without a home that are similar but aren't quite right. For example, they aren't ex-patriots. The refugee is a reluctant leaver, packing up only as a last resort. They aren't relocating in search of political or economic opportunities. They aren't explorers or travelers, people on self-imposed journeys of discovery. Nor are they vacationers, taking a break for a time of relaxation or leisure. No, first and foremost and in every way, refugees desire to remain home. They've been forced to flee for reasons



beyond their control. In fact, they often stay in their homes long past the point of danger, willing to put up with untold risks, holding out hope that peace will return to their homeland before they're forced to flee.

In this book, we take up the task of understanding the dechurched as church refugees. They're people who've made an explicit and intentional decision to leave organized religion. They didn't drift away casually. They didn't move to a new city for a job and never got into the groove of church in a new community. They didn't marry agnostic spouses and give up on convincing them. No, at some point, the dechurched decided, in a very intentional way, that they would be better off leaving the church altogether.

The church, they feel, is keeping them from God. According to them, the church, not God, is the problem, and they've stayed in the church long past the point that it ceased to be fulfilling or even sustaining.

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## The church, not God, is the problem.

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Furthermore, they flee the church not because they hate the church. They have, in fact, worked tirelessly on behalf of the church. They flee for their own spiritual safety, to reconnect with a God they feel has been made distant to them by the structure of religion as practiced in organizations.

## SOCIETAL TRENDS

Before we can even begin to understand the motivations and decision-making processes of church refugees, we need to take a look at the broader religious landscape. In order to answer the question about what's different about our era, we must focus on those elements of our society that have affected people's ability to be engaged with organized religion.

The two most important macro-level trends are undoubtedly the loss of trust in social institutions in general and religious leaders in particular and the perception that religious institutions are no longer tied into the daily life of individuals as intimately as they once were. In other words, they're increasingly considered irrelevant.

### Loss of Trust

It was just a generation or so ago that people expressed high levels of trust in religious leaders, and the church had a reputation as a force for good. Religious institutions in this country had been prominently involved

in many of the human rights struggles from women's suffrage in the 19th century to the civil rights movement in the middle of the 20th century. Local and national religious groups have continually responded admirably to natural disasters and community tragedies. But people trusted religious institutions and leaders not just because they responded to their community needs in times of crisis, but because religious institutions were intimately and continually involved in their local communities. Religious leaders were involved in *doing* things, not simply *proclaiming* things.

In a matter of a few decades, however, that trust has severely eroded. Since 1977 the Gallup organization has regularly asked Americans to rate the honesty and ethical standards of many professions in the United States. In 2013 the clergy received its lowest score ever. The number of people who believe clergy has very high or high levels of honesty and ethical standards fell below 50 percent for the first time. But this was no blip on the radar screen. After peaking at a high of 67 percent in 1985, the decline has been a pretty steady march downward.

One of the people we interviewed for this project is a pastor whose congregation includes a number of formerly dechurched people. Bill is in his mid-30s and has been with his church since it started as a small group nearly a decade ago. He has no formal training or education as a pastor but has evolved into the role. Still, he rarely presents himself as a pastor, introducing himself instead with one of his other vocations. This is intentional, he says, because he found early on that identifying himself as a pastor actually worked against him in trying to gain trust and form relationships, especially with the dechurched people his church is attracting. During the course of our conversation, as if to underscore the findings of the Gallup poll, he said:

It is 100 percent the case that my role as a pastor means that people are inclined to *distrust* me and my intentions. They're inclined from the beginning to think that I'm only interested in their money or telling them what to do. Their first thoughts are not as mine were when I was a child: "That man is a pastor. He must be a really good person who loves me." That implicit trust has been completely turned upside down. As a pastor and staff, we approach every day with the understanding that we need to focus on earning that trust back. It can never be assumed.

According to Bill, then, the loss of trust in religious institutions means that trust must be earned daily—and the work of reestablishing trust must

be done long before the church does any of the work of telling people how to live.

## Loss of Relevance

In her recent book *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, sociologist Nancy Ammerman points out what our data confirm: People are as concerned about religion as ever and are finding religion in their daily lives. However, the trend across all age groups is to move away from church and religious institutions as the central organizing mechanism for this activity. The church is simply not seen as a relevant force in people's daily lives.

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## The church is simply not seen as a relevant force in people's daily lives.

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Rather, people are much more likely to see the church as a kind of niche political institution that's ultimately not concerned with their day-to-day existence. They view the church as inwardly focused and consumed by the politics of its own survival.

What emerges from our data is a picture of a desire for community life, but not one that's centrally organized by a large institution. One could argue that in this sense the church is being caught up in the larger social shift away from institutionally organized life. While monoliths still dominate in nearly every area of social life, we increasingly see the development of thriving alternatives. While Walmart continues to be the dominant retailer in America, farmers' markets and the shop-local movement have seen significant gains in recent years. While the megachurch continues to be a force in American religion, the only other religious movement of note over the last decade in the United States has been the emerging church movement. There is, in other words, beginning to be a critical mass of people who are disinclined to organize their lives around a large, seemingly impenetrable organization. Some people, at least, are desiring a different experience in which they can still operate as a collective but also have an impact and shape their local environments.

This context is important because it has ramifications for how we understand the dechurched movement. As researchers in the sociology of religion, we don't suspect that the growing number of Dones represents a death blow for the church in America. There are simply not enough dechurched in terms of raw numbers to threaten the existence of

institutionalized religion in this country. Additionally, the long history of religion in this country is filled with ups and downs and threats. The church in America is not the European model. The church in America is characterized by adaptation and innovation, not stagnation.

Revivals have consistently punctuated institutional religion in the United States. Take, for example the Great Awakenings that spanned the better part of America's history from the middle of the 1700s to the middle of the 1900s. As the country grew, expanded, and dealt with new challenges, religious institutions adapted and responded to emerging needs. More recently, the megachurch, which developed to meet the needs of a rapidly suburbanizing America, has dramatically altered the religious landscape. Rather than diminishing in the face of new challenges, the church in America creates new ways of engaging the populace.

However, the dechurched movement is a strong leading indicator of the loss of relevance and diminished importance of the church in our society. If the church can't manage to retain its most committed, devoted, and energetic followers, then it's destined to become a greatly diminished force in the social landscape, at least in the immediate future. If the church continues to run off faithful followers who are, by their nature or religious conviction, conciliatory, compromising, and nonjudgmental, then we will continue to see a church that's increasingly insular, alienating, and irrelevant.

In recent years we've seen other indicators of this trend from writers paying more attention to the broad implications of an increasingly isolated church. Books like David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons' *unChristian*, Group Publishing's *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore* and *Why Nobody Wants to Be Around Christians Anymore*, and Drew Dyck's *Generation Ex-Christian* along with more academic reports like the much heralded 2012 Pew report "Nones' on the Rise" paint a picture of the church from both insiders and outsiders of an institution that's increasingly marginalized and losing some of its best and brightest, the very people the church is counting on to lead it into the future.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DECHURCHED

Why should we care about the dechurched? In many ways, what we found in the course of our study is that the dechurched may represent the proverbial canary in the coal mine. In 2011, the distinguished American sociologist Mark Chaves published *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, but one of the titles kicked around for that book was *The Decline of American Religion* because, as he pointed out, while some societal trends have remained stable over the years and some have declined, no indicator

of religious activity in the United States has increased. Drawing on data from the General Social Survey, he notes that in addition to other indicators which have remained stable, “the percentages of Americans who *know* that God exists (64 percent) say they’ve had a born-again experience (36 percent), and who pray several times a week (69 percent) have remained steady since the 1980s.” When overall trends are so stable, why should we care as social scientists about a group of people who are leaving church? Well, as Chaves points out, there are some pretty important indicators that are declining. The much noted numbers about the decline in religious affiliation and decreasing attendance at worship services are particularly germane to this study. Chaves refers to these combinations of trends as a “softening” rather than portending outright doom for institutional expressions of religion.

George Barna and David Kinnaman, in their 2014 book *Churchless*, argue that the dechurched represent 33 percent of the American population. Furthermore, they claim that people characterized as dechurched are the fastest growing segment of the population. However, throughout their book they collapse the category of dechurched into the broader category of unchurched. We think this is unfortunate because the dechurched are a particular type of person distinct from the broader category of unchurched people. For their part, Barna and Kinnaman seem to recognize this as well. They admit that the issue of the dechurched is much more nuanced than the statistics they use to inform their book can convey. *Church Refugees* helps to fill in this gap by providing rigorous analysis along with qualitative data to understand the processes that people go through when they decide to leave the church, what they do when they leave, and what they ultimately want out of church.

However, Barna and Kinnaman do provide two specific pieces of data about the dechurched that are important to highlight.

First, the dechurched are not angry, in general. Leaving “simply reflects the firsthand experiences that led them to conclude churches are ill-equipped to support the flourishing life they hope for.” Throughout this book you’ll read stories of people who express something actually more damaging than anger toward the church. They aren’t mad, for the most part. They’re uninterested. They’ve looked at the data provided by their own lived experiences and decided that church is simply not where they can have the spiritual lives they want.

Second, and related, Barna and Kinnaman point out that “we must admit the possibility that our churches are somehow enabling many people to stall out on their journey toward deep, transformative faith.” As we’ll show, this is much more than a possibility. It’s the reality that our

respondents consistently expressed to us. Furthermore, we hope that by the end of this book, we'll be able to show that churches are not "somehow" enabling people. Rather, we will delineate the specific mechanisms that our respondents say stunt spiritual growth and institutional engagement.

What we note here, however, is that the dechurched not only contribute to the decline in religious affiliation and in worship attendance, but they may also be driving forces behind these trends. Almost without exception, our respondents were deeply involved and devoted to their churches up until the moment they left. They were integrated into leadership structures and church life, often organizing daily life around the church and attending some kind of church function two or more times a week. They're the kind of people who are drawn to activity.

Take Jeff, for example. He's 55 years old and recently retired, from both his job and his church, where he was active for three decades, serving in a variety of capacities, including worship leader and youth director. When we talked, he said he had to make a complete break with his church once he felt he could no longer have an impact there. He could not simply sit in the pew on Sunday and walk away. He told me, "It's just hard for me to be a passive worshipper. I've got to be in the mix. I'm a player. I've got to do things. That's how I understand my faith and how I understand God." Jeff's words summarize the theme that runs through the vast majority of our interviews. The dechurched are so active and involved because activity is central to their pursuit of God. They don't know any other way to be a Christian.

Additionally, not one person in our sample left the church after just one bad experience. They thought the church was important enough to keep trying and trying. In fact, in our sample the average number of churches attended prior to leaving is more than four, spanning a number of years, indicating an astonishing commitment to the institution. The dechurched wanted to make the institution work, and they often worked for years for reform from within. Although the dechurched are people who have walked away, I would never question their commitment. In fact, if it were possible to stack up the energies and activities of the dechurched, that tower may well reach higher than the energy and activity that remain inside the walls of the institution.

Clearly, the dechurched are outliers in the religious landscape. However, they're extremely important outliers. They're the ones who, prior to leaving, showed up at worship every week and tithed. They organized and participated in small-group activities, Bible studies, worship planning, church councils, elder teams, and a plethora of other activities and services that are the lifeblood of churches big and small. They were the

keepers of organizational history and played a significant role in defining institutional identity.

They're the opposite of the free riders who consume church resources but contribute little. Indeed, their work and activity make it possible for a congregation to support the free riders who often make up the bulk of church attendees on a given Sunday. The idea that inside of every committed congregant exists a strong potential to become dechurched represents more than just the loss of one congregant; it represents the potential loss of the kind of activity necessary to keep the doors open.

The data for this book consist of nearly 100 in-depth interviews, and the general profile of our respondents supports the idea that the dechurched are highly valuable churchgoers.

Our respondents are generally financially stable, very likely to be married, and have substantially higher levels of education than the churchgoing population in general. The 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by Pew provides some interesting comparison data. While about 15 percent of the affiliated Christian population have a college degree, our *average* respondent has completed at least some graduate-level work, and an astonishing 87 percent are either currently enrolled in college or have completed an undergraduate degree. Furthermore, 77 percent of our sample over the age of 25 are married and report household incomes of around \$65,000. Additionally, the vast majority have spent years in the church and in ministry positions.

These church refugees, then, aren't like the vast majority of churchgoers, and they aren't quite like the vast majority of the religiously unaffiliated. They are a stable, powerful, and important group of people.

Refugees are a significant concern for any society. Although the popular image of a refugee is of someone who is poor and powerless, living in substandard conditions, refugees also comprise those in a society who had the political, economic, and social capital to escape. And when they flee a society, they take all of those assets with them. The mass exodus of people from a country is rightly characterized in the short term as a humanitarian crisis, but in the long run, it's a very different problem. The refugee represents the loss of a significant investment in human talent. Countries invest in their citizens by providing some level of access to education, healthcare, and jobs. Often those who have the means to leave are the ones who have been invested in the most. They have the best jobs and educations, the most skills. They have the greatest social and political power. And when they leave, they take all of that with them.

Similarly, the church invests in its congregants, especially those who rise to positions of leadership. When the Dones walk out of the church, they

take with them all of the institutional knowledge and training, all of their energy and talents, and all of their community and social connections that extend beyond the walls of the church. Our interviews indicate that the dechurched are among the most dedicated people in any congregation. They often work themselves into positions of leadership in an attempt to fix the things about the church that dissatisfy them before ultimately deciding their energies could be better spent elsewhere. In other words, the dechurched were the “doers” in their congregations.

## ETHAN'S STORY

Perhaps the best way to get a sense of the general profile of a dechurched person is through Ethan's story. Ethan is a 47-year-old salesperson with three children. I met him on a spring day at a coffee shop near his office. He was initially reluctant, he said, to be interviewed because he still felt protective of the church and didn't want to be seen as trashing it. “Church leaders have been through a lot lately,” he said. “Some of it's deserved, brought upon by their own actions, but a lot of it isn't. I think they're tired of getting beat up.” He was eventually swayed by talking with his friend who had already done an interview with us and convinced him that we weren't really looking to point out the church's flaws.

His story is just one illustration of how embedded the dechurched often were in their congregations. He explained how, after a childhood of church involvement, he went to college and got involved in campus ministry before eventually making a career out of ministry and then abandoning the “flawed structure” of the church altogether:

So I did campus ministry for years. I learned how to preach, I learned youth ministry, learned biblical counseling, and when I got out I went back to my old church, and they hired me as their youth pastor. Then I did assistant pastoring for three and a half years there, and I ran a youth drop-in center that was sponsored by United Way, where we tutored kids and had organized basketball, volleyball, field trips, and that type of thing. I did youth group for the church, and I led worship, and I led weddings, burials, and that sort of thing. For years I did all of that.

When I left after a scandal with the head pastor cheating on his wife, we attended another church a few towns over, and I



was helping with the youth group there, and then they offered me a position. For the next six years, I was an associate pastor, and we did all the adult Christian education, children's ministry, led worship, pretty much a little of everything. From there it was on to Florida following my wife's job and on to another church which dissolved because the elders were stealing church money, and then out to Colorado, where we got involved again. We just can't help getting involved when we have talents to offer and we see a need, I guess.

Since 2010, though, when we finally left the church, we've just done house church where we create and do things *with* others rather than *for* them. I'm done with the top-down, institutional church. I thought we could fix it from within, but we got beat up pretty bad. I know we didn't always handle things the best way, but at the same time, we kept showing up and volunteering because we felt the church was God's home.

I don't think that's the case anymore. The church is wherever God's work is being done, and too often the way we were treated and the things I saw happen in the institutional church to other people just weren't in alliance with what we thought God wanted.

But here's the thing: I don't think the institutional church is filled with bad people. I think the church in America is an inherently flawed structure that compels people to make poor decisions. You're basically judged on how well you can preach and the numbers you bring in. *I realize the church isn't perfect, and it's made up of people who aren't perfect, and I'm not perfect either, but the church needs to see that there are things that are broken about the structure, not the people.* (Emphasis added.)

I offer this extended excerpt from Ethan's interview because it's representative of nearly all of the stories we heard. Although not everyone we talked to was involved in paid ministry, nearly all of them rose to a position of leadership during their years in the church. Often this happened in a way that's eerily similar to Ethan's experience. They

would get heavily involved in a particular congregation, move for some reason or another and gradually, though not intentionally, begin taking on leadership roles at the new church. At some level, this speaks to the crushing organizational demands of running a congregation in today's religious landscape. Talent is hard to come by and resources even more scarce. It's only natural that a congregation would latch onto dedicated, experienced, and talented people.

However, Ethan's story and the dozens like his reveal something about the kind of people who generally make up the dechurched. They display an extreme level of dedication and devotion to God and religion, and they earnestly believe that the institutional church can be fixed and reclaimed. They believe it's worth fighting for right up to the point where they don't.

Ethan's involvement with organized religion eventually ended for the same general reasons that will show up again and again in the following pages. When I asked him what led to his eventually leaving the church, he simply said, "At first it was just survival, man. Spiritual survival. We had to get out." This language of spiritual abuse and survival represents a nearly constant theme running through our data. People put up with a lot of abuse before finally feeling the need to flee in order to keep their spiritual selves alive.

In many ways, it's this dynamic that's really at the heart of this book. How can the church possibly hope to survive and thrive as a relevant and meaningful social institution if it keeps spitting out Ethan and people like him? If people who are so dedicated to the church feel the need, ultimately, to leave for their own survival, what does that say about the church and its future?

Ethan became a religious person without a home when he and his family left institutional religion, forced to flee for his own spiritual survival. His response, creating and doing a house church, is both an indictment of institutional religion in America and a clue about where it might be headed. He and his wife didn't give up on God; they gave up on the institutional expression of church. They didn't stop doing things to advance what they believed to be the work of *God*; they stopped doing things to advance the work of the *church*. Their substantial energies and skills are now poured daily into activities and structures that happen completely outside the purview of organized religion. They've opted for relationship over structure, doing over dogma, and creating *with* rather than creating *for*. In short, they've created a new religious home.

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This imagery returns us to the metaphor of the refugee. In a 2014 interview for World Refugee Day, Thuyet Nguyen, a 35-year-old Vietnamese refugee, was asked if it was important to stay connected to his country of origin or culture. He responded by drawing a distinction between the two, saying, “My culture, yes...My birth country, not so much... We are creating our own culture here, and it’s something that is unique and beautiful.”

As Mr. Nguyen demonstrates with his own experience and the research about refugees backs up in a more systematic way, people will abandon their countries when they’re forced to, but they will retain their culture. Similarly, the dechurched have a strong desire to retain Christianity as a belief system and an equally strong desire to create a new culture of Christianity, but they’re willing to abandon the church if it becomes necessary for their own survival.

Because of this, the dechurched movement represents a serious challenge to the church. Though we have every reason to believe the dechurched movement is large and growing, the numbers aren’t as important as the type of people who are likely to become dechurched. In short, the dechurched are the people who do things, and without them, the church comes perilously close to losing relevance for people who want an active and engaged faith.

For years the church has laid almost exclusive claim to the energies and talents of faithful people. Years ago, if a person like Ethan wanted to be actively engaged in his community, the church served as one of the few outlets to organize such activity. It served as an important conduit for social activity. But this is not the case today, when people are increasingly connected in a myriad of ways that supersede the organizational capacity of the church. As Ethan demonstrates, people don’t need the church to engage in meaningful community or religious activity. They can and are creating their own culture.

The Dones might lament the loss of the church and grieve the abandonment of an institution they once loved and were so hopeful for, but that won’t stop them from actively expressing their faith. As one respondent, Ava, told us, “There’s pain in leaving. There’s loss. But there’s hope, too. We’re able to *do* things now.”

There’s real reason to believe, then, that in the future, religious activity in America will happen outside the bounds of the institutional church. As

has been made extremely clear to us throughout the course of this research, there's a strong *desire* among our respondents for church, but there's no longer a *need* for church. The dechurched are tenacious and resourceful, drawing on their immense networks, knowledge, and training to engage in meaningful activity. They're finding ways to be the church outside of the institution.

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**In the future, religious activity in America will happen outside the bounds of the institutional church.**

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But the church will survive these challenges. Indeed, the church in America has survived much more significant challenges than those it is currently experiencing. The question is not whether the church in America will exist in 25 years. The question is entirely about what form it will take. Will it be a vibrant institution engaged in the meaningful issues in people's daily lives, a vital and indispensable guide in their struggle to make meaning out of life? Or will it be a curious outpost on the cultural landscape, serving only its own believers with an outmoded and out-of-touch social message?

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Ashleigh and I are simultaneously hopeful for the church and concerned about what the empirical data here and elsewhere tell us. Our personal preference is for a church that's engaging, important, and vibrant, but as scientists we can't ignore the data, which paint quite a different picture for the future of the Christian church in America.

Understanding how the church manages to drive away already committed believers, to make dechurched people out of church people, is a necessary step toward charting a new future for the church in America.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

This study draws on nearly 100 in-depth interviews with people who have made an active, deliberate decision to leave the institutional church.

We use the terms *dechurched* and *Dones* interchangeably throughout this text to describe these people. We had the privilege to catch people in all stages of the disaffiliation process. We talked to people just as they were about to leave, in some cases during their last weeks in church, and to others as they were tentatively trying out new congregations at the behest of friends or family members. The vast majority of our respondents, however, had been out of church for a while before talking with us and were not actively looking for a new faith community. Some of our respondents have since returned after a hiatus, but others have determined never to attend church regularly again. While everyone's story is unique, there are some common tensions that emerge among the dechurched.

- They wanted community...and got judgment.
- They wanted to affect the life of the church...and got bureaucracy.
- They wanted conversation...and got doctrine.
- They wanted meaningful engagement with the world...and got moral prescription.

Although our interview guide was crafted to allow for as much open conversation as possible while still staying on topic, these four contradictions came through time and again when we analyzed the data. People who had virtually nothing in common other than their decision to leave organized religion ended up telling remarkably similar stories centered around these four themes. As sociologists, this indicates to us pretty strongly that this phenomenon is not due to a few misfit personalities or bad church experiences. Rather, given the consistency in the data, we are reasonably sure that the dechurched phenomenon is directly attributable to a pattern that exists in the organizational and leadership structure of many, if not all, congregations in the United States.

However, we don't find any reason in the data to believe that these patterns are new. Just the opposite, in fact. Instead, what accounts for the rise in the dechurched is old ways of doing the "business" of church combined with new, contemporary understandings of what church is and should be. As our respondents show when discussing these tensions, the failure of the church to adapt to new cultural realities is a fundamental issue driving the dechurched movement. In short, what worked for

churches to attract and keep people in the 1980s or 1990s can be the same practices that drive people away in the 2000s.

We take up each of these tensions in Chapters 2 through 5. What emerges is not only a more nearly complete picture of why seemingly engaged and committed people would leave the church, but also what can be done to repair that damage and prevent growing numbers of churchgoers from becoming dechurched. The importance of community, conversation, and meaningful activity come through clearly in these chapters.

In Chapter 6, then, we turn our attention to understanding how a congregation can be the church that nobody wants to leave in the first place. Drawing on the data presented in Chapters 2 through 5, we describe practices to avoid and those to encourage to keep people engaged, happy, and healthy in their home congregations as they grow and progress through their lives of faith. In that chapter, and indeed throughout the book, we report only what the data tell us. We avoid taking personal stances in favor of relaying the collective wisdom of our research participants.

As useful as these strategies are, however, they don't address the already substantial issue of the dechurched who currently exist. What, if anything, can be done to bring these people back to church? Is the work of God advanced more substantially by this group of dedicated outsiders, or is there benefit for everyone in trying to reengage the Dones? We address these questions as well in Chapter 6.

In the final chapter we bring all of this research together to argue that more than anything what the dechurched want is a home in the truest sense of the word. A place that's safe and supportive and refreshing and challenging. An identifiable place, embedded in a larger community where they both know and are known by those around them and where they feel they can have a meaningful impact on the world. They long for the same kind of church that we all long for. They desire a church that's active and engaged with the world, where people can bring their full and authentic selves and receive love and community in return. Without a church home, the dechurched wander the religious landscape often forgotten and unaccounted for by the both religious practitioners and scholars. This book is an attempt to collect their stories into a cohesive and understandable unit.