

The Subtle Exodus

Why Christian 20-Somethings Are Leaving the Church

By Coletta Smith

“I don’t need a church, I need a family.”

I’d watched her spend the last 6 years since high school in and out of church, trying to figure out where it fit into her new life as an adult. She’d gone from telling God to “forget it” to realizing that He was the only One able to give her the strength she needed to raise her little baby alone. She knew she needed God, but where could she find Him? For a while, she had tried out a church that focused on the needs of the “fringe” – those who had been marginalized by the traditional church - but somehow it didn’t feel like the family she longed for. So, now she was coming back to the church where she was involved in high school, my church.

But to be honest, I’m not sure that this is the best place for her. Our church is full of young families, but we’re not a college town, so there really aren’t many people her age here. After graduation, most of our teens leave town because it’s too expensive to live here. No big deal. But a lot of them leave church when they leave town. This seems to be a national trend. In Barna’s 2007 report, he says that 61% of students who were spiritually active in high school are spiritually “disengaged” after graduation.

When Steve Mansfield (author of *The Faith of George W. Bush* and former pastor of Belmont Church in Nashville), was interviewed by the *Wittenburg Door* (July-August, 2007), a Christian satire magazine, one of the first things he talked about was that the young are forsaking church. “If we’re going to talk about the church today, let’s be really blunt...People are voting with their feet. The next generation is not going to church. For the most part, they are going to the First Church of Starbucks. The future of the church is five people over a latte studying a copy of the Purpose Driven something or other. In fifteen years, present trends continuing, the church in America will be half of what it is.” From Gallup to Barna, the polls agree with this conclusion: people that were raised in church are choosing to leave. Some abandon their faith entirely, but many continue in a solo pursuit of God.

In her book *Quitting Church*, Julia Duin, the religion editor for the *Washington Times*, says that “survey after survey says many Americans continue their private religious practices, such as reading the Bible, praying to God, and even sharing their faith in Jesus Christ. But they have given up on the institution.” So, while the hunger for God and the general spiritual appetite may remain, where they are going to fill that hunger is changing. As I’ve worked with youth and 20-somethings for the last twenty years, this has been overwhelmingly obvious. A growing number of students graduate and simply don’t see the church as an essential contributor to their growth or an integral part of what God is doing in our culture. So what are they looking for that they are not finding in church?

Church-bashing seems to be fashionable right now, so please don’t misunderstand me: I continue to believe that the church is an integral means by which God equips and empowers us

to be His people. Jesus Christ was the physical representative of God on earth. Since the ascension, He has called us as His Body to take on that job of representing Him to a watching world. The church as an institution is not exactly the same thing as His Body, but the institution of the church is an important way in which Jesus equips and empowers His Body. So, what can we do about the fact that a big part of the Body is abandoning this key vehicle for transformation?

Let's take a look at some sources of the problem and some ways to let Jesus into them.

In Barna's 2002 article for *Christianity Today*, he detailed nine challenges facing the contemporary church. Our failure to address these challenges is one of the driving factors in the 20-something exodus.

1. Worship is stale – same old, same old.
2. Evangelicals are watering down their theological beliefs.
3. Evangelical congregations are still racially segregated.
4. The Bible has lost its authority, especially on issues such as divorce and premarital sex.
5. Christianity in America has essentially no built-in cost.
6. Any expression of the supernatural has been excised from Sunday worship.
7. No one is ready for the fact that Gen Y Christians are going to radically reinvent the church.
8. U.S. churches tend to compete rather than cooperate.
9. There is a dearth of good leaders. Those who fill America's pulpits are teachers – good people all – but not leaders with a vision.

The reason I bring up this study (even though it is seven years old - practically ancient by today's standards) is simple: most of the evangelical world needed a published study to point out these alarming trends in the church, but recent research into the 20-something exodus reveals that they have been seeing these trends for a long time. However, this is a non-confrontational generation. They would rather slip out unnoticed and do their own thing than work for change within the established church. So, the 20-something exodus is really more like a quiet disappearance. They're leaving because church doesn't seem to have what they're looking for, but what is that?

20-Somethings Want to See God

Where do 20-somethings expect to see God? Often in whatever is different. If they grew up in a liturgical background, they'll look for modern modes of worship. Conversely, if they grew up in a media-driven church, they'll often turn to churches which feature hymns, silence, and creeds. This reactionary search for "different" is partly what makes the "emergent" church movement so diverse and thus so difficult to define. 20-somethings crave the opportunity for unexpected encounters with God. Unfortunately, many of our worship services have no room for such fresh experiences. They are the same week after week, with little or no room for new ways of seeing God and entering into worship as a response to who we've seen Him to be.

20-Somethings Want Authenticity

Part of making room for fresh encounters with God requires a different kind of teaching. There is a widespread belief among 20-somethings that teaching only allows them to see God when it is intimately connected to real life. They are longing for deeper answers to difficult questions. Church leaders need to be willing to get beyond the basic teachings of Christianity. They must deal with the issues that we face daily, even those that cause us to doubt. Unfortunately, these are issues that few churches have the guts to deal with – issues like unanswered prayer or the divinely ordained genocide of entire ethnic groups in the O.T. or how a body ravaged by chromosomal abnormalities could have been “knit together in my mother’s womb.” Issues that raise the specter of doubt are often off-limits in church, but we must teach congregations to see doubt not as the enemy of faith but as a catalyst. Dr. Craig Smith, president of Shepherd Project Ministries and professor at Denver Seminary reminds me that “settled unbelief, not doubt, is the opposite of faith. God often uses doubts to cause us to establish a more firm foundation, if they are met with a willingness to work through difficult issues by investigating Scripture and being authentic and bold in its application to our lives.”

Beyond simply dealing with difficult issues, 20-somethings see God when these issues are addressed by teachers who are transparent and authentic. A teacher needs to be willing to let listeners in on his or her own struggle as they live out the Christian life. Only then will 20-somethings grant a teacher authority in their lives. A seminary degree once earned a pastor the right to be heard. Now, knowing that the pastor can relate to their struggles to apply the Truth is what earns him credibility with 20-somethings.

For example, in *Quitting Church*, Duin talks about the need for the church (both from up front and in the back) to talk about the messy issues of life with Christ. “A lot of churches do not want to deal with the sexual chaos in a lot of singles’ lives...they are not dealing with the messiness of life,” says Brian McLaren, founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Maryland (whose membership is about 50 percent single). Most churches are filled with married people who either forget about or aren’t willing to talk with their single friends about the battle in trying to live a celibate life.

Addressing issues that 20-somethings deal with doesn’t mean abandoning in-depth teaching from Scripture in favor of watered-down topical preaching. It means that teachers must become shrewd students of our culture and adopt a “no-tiptoeing” practice of applying the passages they are teaching.

20-Somethings Want Relationships

20-somethings long for genuine relationships. If they aren’t available in the church, then 20-somethings will look elsewhere. As I got to spend some time with Margaret Feinberg¹ at a conference in Ohio last summer, where she did several seminars on what churches across the country are doing to reach out to 20-somethings. Getting to know her, I was reminded again and

¹ As a side-note, Margaret blew me out of the water when she told me about one of her writing practices. Her conviction is that we ought not to pursue change simply for change’s sake, but that we need to embrace new ways of introducing the God of all time to our ever-changing culture (my paraphrase). In an effort to make sure that while she became a catalyst for change in the church, her theology stayed true to scripture, she sought out some people to be on her team. She now has all of her book manuscripts proofread by Theology and New Testament professors from Denver Seminary!

again of the importance of relationships. Feinberg has been named by *Charisma* magazine as one of the “30 Emerging Voices” who will lead the church into the next generation and is the author of more than a dozen books including *The Organic God* and *The Sacred Echo*. Just last week, she told me that, “While a boomer walks into a church and asks questions like, ‘What’s going on here? What are the core doctrines? What’s the history?’, students and young adults walk into the same church and ask, ‘Who’s here? And do they love me?’ They’re longing for authentic community and relationship. They hunger for people to mentor them, open up their lives, and encourage them. They want to be relationally connected in a way that deepens their faith, challenges them, and helps them know the scripture.”

20-Somethings Want To Change the World

This generation needs to be changing their community...and their world! They are tired of church that is primarily therapeutic² and about self-improvement. With schedules that are packed, they desperately want to be investing in something that counts, and know that they are not wasting their time.

I was on a plane back to Colorado a few weeks ago, when God put me beside a 20-something gal studying for her Emergency Medical Tech exam. As we talked, I told her a little about Shepherd Project Ministries and what I do and asked about her life and her faith. When I saw the excitement with which she spoke about her faith, I knew this was a divine appointment. A junior at University of Northern Colorado, Merissa said she’d quit going to church for a few years after graduating from high school. When she decided to try church again, she ended up getting involved with Christ Community in Greeley, Colorado. When she talked about the church, she said “the music was contemporary, the people were friendly, and the pastor knew the group he was talking to.” But I wanted to know what made Christ Community Church so appealing to her and her friends! Here’s what she told me. “The thing that made me want to get involved was when I heard about the high school lunch program. It seemed like they would welcome anyone who wanted to help in any way that they could, and I knew that I needed to get into a church community. When we showed up, the people running it were so nice, accommodating, and outgoing...all with a servant’s heart. They loved being there to serve those high schoolers, even if it was only by scooping food onto their plastic plates. When we met the youth minister, he was thrilled to meet us and said we were perfect for his program too...this was encouraging and nudged me to get a little more involved. Overall, the church was always buzzing with talk about all of their outreach to both the community of Greeley and throughout the world. They wanted to really make a difference in the people around them, the people they were in contact with every day, at the church, the store, or at work. They really wanted to be Jesus to everyone they came in contact with, forgiving, accepting, and loving them for who they were.” This church is not in the inner city – nor is it in a highly ethnic area. But this church has prayed and seen the group of “orphans and widows” (James 1:27) that they are to love. This is a ministry that 20-somethings are truly *perfect* for – and they are changing their community, living out the love of Jesus.

We Have to Stop Passing the Buck

As I talk with people about the 20-something exodus from church, an inevitable temptation always arises – to pass the buck: if the pastor would just preach the right messages; if the

² The book *Quitting Church* has some interesting things to say about this. See p. 39.

worship team would just play the right music; if someone would just start a college group... Let's let go of this – it only prevents growth and burdens the already burdened. The solution is not going to be provided by one leader or one ministry in the church. Unfortunately, too many people think the solution is the responsibility of a church's youth ministry. For instance, a recent article entitled "Faith After High School" in the Fall 2008 *Networker* magazine (a publication for youth workers) provided a list of ideas for youth pastors/youth workers to increase communication and build growing relationships with graduates. But as the author acknowledges, spring not only brings graduation but a new crop of freshmen, so this approach puts even more pressure on already loaded position. Is that really the best option?

More than another program that caters to their individual needs or a weekly phone call from their old youth pastor, graduates need to be integrated into the life of the WHOLE church, to see that they are valued and that their contribution is essential in the church body. Margaret Feinberg had this to say when asked about what the best thing is that we can do to help 20-somethings to stay involved in church. "While youth group meetings and gatherings are fun, "big church" seems a whole lot more flat and boring. They wonder how to connect and integrate—relationally, spiritually, and personally. That's why it's essential that youth leaders are intentional about integrating students into the life of the church from a young age through opportunities to serve and be served (cook a meal for the seniors then enjoy a meal prepared by the seniors of the church), build relationship with leaders, develop intergenerational ministry opportunities, and even speak into the life of the church, "If you could do anything as a part of the life of this church what would you do?" Such intentional activities not only give students the opportunity to build rich relationships but also to speak into the life of the church. In addition, leaders need to prepare their graduating students that no two churches are the same—but all have something to celebrate. Students need to be prepared that they'll never find another church just like their home church at college, but that they can (and should) become involved and make a difference there."

Conclusion

There's a quiet disappearance of 20-somethings from the church. Their disappearance is leaving the Body of Christ handicapped, lacking a leg or an arm. Instead of seeing the needs of 20-somethings as a burden or being irritated at them for wanting to change the church, let's look at their needs as an opportunity for the Body of Christ to grow. Their contributions are essential if the church is to be a significant molder of our culture. Let's find new ways to help them to experience God through worship and see Him working through authentic relationships. Let's become people who know and understand who God is well enough so that we are able to work through the tougher issues of faith with them. And let us not miss the opportunity for those conversations because of our fear or because we are simply unprepared or unwilling. Finally, let us create those opportunities for Jesus to use us, His Body, to change the world. Perhaps the world He will change is right down the street. It's all about seeing Jesus do what only He can do. When we, as His church, step out in faith, it may be that the 20-somethings are not the only ones who catch a new glimpse of God.