

How About the Dechurched? by Ken Behnken

This article first appeared in the December 2, 2005, Mission Moments newsletter from the Center for U.S. Missions. Permission is given to copy this article for distribution within your own congregation. Please credit the author and the Center for U.S. Missions in Irvine, California, www.centerforusmissions.org. For more information, contact the Center at 949-854-8002 x1780.

I read a number of articles recently dealing with the people going out the back doors of our churches. Many are not newcomers to the faith, but are long time members. They are elders and chairmen of boards and committees; they are Sunday school teachers and Bible class leaders.

Sociologist Alan Jamieson, in a survey for his recent book *A Churchless Faith*, found that most people adrift from the traditional church are longtime Christians with significant leadership resumes. 94% had been church leaders and 32% had been in full-time ministry.

The latest statistics report 12 million dechurched people in America right now. If your town is average, thousands of recently dechurched people live near your church.¹ Craig Bird, in a recent article at www.faithworks.com, called these dechurched “post-congregational” Christians.

Jamieson, who studies the quest of these post-congregational Christians, compares them to “travelers who abandon a luxury liner in mid-cruise. They grow tired of the endless buffets and entertainment, the carefully designed activities, or the captain who makes all the decisions about the ship’s speed and direction. They are longing to experience what is not on the itinerary. They sell all they have to buy a small boat and leave the well-traveled sea lanes for uncharted waters.”²

“George Barna noted two years ago that large numbers of American adults regularly participate in faith activities – prayer, Bible reading, use of the religious media – even though they haven’t attended a church service in six months. They are ignoring church, not faith, he said. Relatively few unchurched people are atheists. Most of them call themselves Christians and have had a serious dose of the church life in the past.”³

Is your church designed to reach the “leavers”? Michael Johnson, in an article titled “If We Can’t Reach the Dechurched, Can We Really Reach the Unchurched?” suggests the following:

- Would it make more sense to first become the kind of church that is highly effective in reaching the dechurched?
- What we can learn from the dechurched may be more important than what they can learn from us.
- Collaboration, rather than assimilation, may be a more appropriate goal to set with regard to the dechurched.

- Understand that dechurched people are probably closest to the solutions needed to reach and transform your city.⁴

It is important to take a second look at those people leaving the institutional church. Rob McAlpine, in his article “Detoxing from Church,” reminds us, “. . .these are people who are in love with Jesus, and who want to be a part of the healthy functioning Body of Christ. If they didn’t care, there would be no issues. They wouldn’t be upset. They would either leave altogether and never again seek out fellowship with other believers, or they would passively go through the motions week after week and never give their spiritual status second thought. It is far too easy for the church to make these people the enemy when in fact they are not.”⁵

I encourage you to take time to read in full the articles from which I have quoted. We have often neglected this area of outreach. When people leave our church fellowship, it is easy to write them off and never seek to find out “Why?” ■

¹ Mindstorm Idealetter, June 7, 2005, breakthroughchurch.com

² A churchless faith, Craig Bird, June 7, 2005: www.faithworks.com

³ Ibid

⁴ Mindstorm Idealetter, p.1 breakthroughchurch.com

⁵ Detoxing From Church, Rob McAlpine: www.robbymak.org