



CHURCH REFUGEES

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

JOSH PACKARD, PH.D. and ASHLEIGH HOPE

Loveland, CO

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Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done
With Church but Not Their Faith

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Interior: Andy Towler

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

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 or via our Twitter account, @DechurchAmerica or at 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, 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 discipling 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."

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

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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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.

The church, not God, is the problem.

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



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