

Group

# WHY NOBODY WANTS TO GO TO CHURCH ANYMORE

AND HOW 4 ACTS OF LOVE  
WILL MAKE YOUR CHURCH  
IRRESISTIBLE



THOM & JOANI SCHULTZ

Best-selling authors of *Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church*

# WHY NOBODY WANTS TO GO TO CHURCH ANYMORE

AND HOW 4 ACTS OF LOVE  
WILL MAKE YOUR CHURCH  
IRRESISTIBLE

Loveland, CO

THOM & JOANI SCHULTZ

Group



## Group resources really work!

This Group resource incorporates our R.E.A.L. approach to ministry. It reinforces a growing friendship with Jesus, encourages long-term learning, and results in life transformation, because it's:

**Relational**—Learner-to-learner interaction enhances learning and builds Christian friendships.

**Experiential**—What learners experience through discussion and action sticks with them up to 9 times longer than what they simply hear or read.

**Applicable**—The aim of Christian education is to equip learners to be both hearers and doers of God's Word.

**Learner-based**—Learners understand and retain more when the learning process takes into consideration how they learn best.

## Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore: And How 4 Acts of Love Will Make Your Church Irresistible

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# Acknowledgements

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Thanks to our Lifetree team, especially Craig Cable, Mikal Keefer, and Candace McMahan, who weekly immerse in this God-adventure we call Lifetree Café.

We are grateful for our friends in ministry who span all locations, faith traditions, and experiences—and our Lifetree Café friends who span all locations, faith traditions, and experiences.

And now thanks to the team who brought this resource into its multiple forms.

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- to our word experts: Jeff White, Candace McMahan, Cris Alsum, and Kelsey Perry.
- to our production and marketing team: Amy Nappa, Becky Hodges, Melissa Towers, Jon Vaughan, and Amy Taylor.
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- and the photos? All to Thom's credit, sharing his photography “hobby.”

# INTRODUCTION

**THERE'S NO EASY WAY TO SAY THIS,  
BUT IT NEEDS TO BE SAID:  
THE AMERICAN CHURCH IS BROKEN.**

Those words break our hearts more than you can possibly know. But before we jump into that subject—as well as the abundance of hope that things can change—you need to know our hearts. You need to understand why we care. And, most of all, you need to know how much we love the church.

Before we challenge you to change, to be vulnerable, it's only fair we reveal ourselves to you. It'll help you understand our perspective. In this book, we'll challenge you to take a “look in the mirror.” Before we do, here's a peek at us. See if you can relate.

We both grew up in the church. We came from families that valued faith and churchgoing. And we've dedicated our lives to serving the church.



**THOM:** I grew up in a Christian home, the kind we hope kids today could experience. My dad taught Bible classes and held leadership positions in our churches. My mom was a pillar of prayer. I volunteered at church even as a junior high kid. God had placed something in my heart even then—both a love and an angst for the local church. As a teenager, I wrote a play called *Onward Christian Soldiers*, prodding the church to make changes. (Maybe some things never change...)

Through college and beyond, I volunteered as an adult leader for my church's youth group. That is, until I felt called to take a leap of faith and start Group Magazine, a meager little newsprint magazine filled with youth ministry ideas I thought others like me might desperately need.

With \$500, prayer, and youthful naiveté, I started our company, Group Publishing. If I'd known then what I know now, I'd have known it couldn't be done. That's all the more reason we believe in God's miraculous power!



**JOANI:** My family story is a church-ed one, too. I served nearly 100 different churches for two years as a district “youth staffer.” That included rural, suburban, and inner-city youth ministries. I stayed with families, lived out of my suitcase, and gained extra pounds because I was a “special guest” in host homes all over southern Minnesota. I can't believe I didn't even have an apartment! I consulted and served churches that desired my volunteer time. Just room and board—oh, and a \$120 monthly stipend for toothpaste and sundries. What incredible hands-on, on-the-job experience!

For the next seven years, I loved serving fulltime at a church in Wisconsin wearing multiple hats—youth ministry, children's ministry...everything. I treasure my experiences there in an awesome team ministry with the pastor, Gene Glade, who remains a precious friend. The church allowed me to volunteer on regional and national levels, writing and planning events and leading workshops. Those amazing experiences and wonderful relationships prepared me for Group, which I joined when the company was 10 years old.



**WE** came together because of Group, which exists for one purpose: to serve the church. We got married as best friends, and at Group we've combined our faith, our love for the local church, our philosophy of what really works with people of any age, and our values.

We're regular people who've been on church staff and served as volunteers. We're happy to serve in the background, like accompanists, so your ministry can shine. We've dedicated our lives to serving the local church, while actively studying and immersing ourselves in the church.

We're passionate about the transformational power of a Jesus-centered life and God's desire for the church to embody that. Our goal is to see lives transformed.

Here's what else you need to know about us:

- **We love people in ministry.**

When we were growing up, our families were involved in our churches and supportive of our pastors. Thom's dad was the president of congregations; Joani's grandma was a widow and pastor's wife. When I (Joani) was growing up, we adopted pastors and their families. We'd invite them to meals and family events—they even helped us bale hay on our South Dakota farm. Both of us supported ministries as faithful volunteers. And today we enjoy entertaining people who visit Group headquarters when they attend ReGroups (intimate two- to three-day conferences). We love to open up our home so people in ministry can simply *be* as they get to know others who share their hearts for ministry in a warm, safe, comfortable environment. (And you're welcome to drop by Group anytime, be applauded when you walk in the door, and meet Bruce—our audio-animatronic talking moose!)

- **We're experience creators.**

We're not traditional publishers who only produce books. We hold tightly to our **R.E.A.L.** philosophy of learning:

**Relational**—Learner-to-learner interaction enhances learning and builds Christian friendships.

**Experiential**—What learners experience through discussion and action sticks with them up to 9 times longer than what they simply hear or read.

**Applicable**—The aim of Christian education is to equip learners to be both hearers and doers of God's Word.

**Learner-based**—Learners understand and retain more when the learning process takes into consideration how they learn best.

“Learning by experiencing” permeates all our Sunday school curriculum, vacation Bible school programs, books, magazines, online resources, training, mission trips, and more. “Do” is embedded in everything we do. We provide materials and experiences that immerse people in environments designed for them to encounter God and for their faith to grow.

First Corinthians 3:6-7 says, “I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. It's not important who does the planting, or who does the watering. What's important is that God makes the seed grow.” The experiences we design are all about planting and watering.



- **Our organization serves the church.**

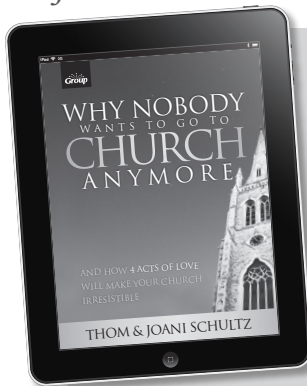
The hearts and attitudes of our staff reflect this in all their interactions with the people who buy our products. We don't call them customers—they're our friends in ministry. A great friendship includes time together, love, conversation, encouragement, and more. A true friend is also someone who will say the hard stuff. And sometimes the truth is tough to swallow. It's because we love our friends in ministry so much that we're willing to take the risk of saying difficult things. This book is an outgrowth of our love for the Lord, our love for our friends in ministry, and our love for people.

We talk with thousands of church leaders and workers every week. We live and breathe “church”—serving churches of every denomination, size, location, tradition, and ministry. Group is a safe, prayerful place for our friends in ministry to share their stories, both good and bad. Through those countless conversations, we've been able to keep our finger on the pulse of the church over the years.

We serve the majority of the reported 300,000 churches in North America in some way. Group materials reach more than 40 countries around the world. Millions of children, youth, and adults are recipients of our resources, whether they know it or not. Our resources work within the entire spectrum of Christian faith traditions. That's because we focus on what Christians agree on, not what separates us. (And there's a *lot* we Christians agree on—Jesus, for example.) We intentionally serve the span of Christendom, with the demographics of our churches matching the demographics of churches in North America within a few percentage points. Our team of more than 250 dedicated staff share in a united mission: *To equip churches to help children, youth, and adults grow in their relationship with Jesus.*

But as much as we love the church, we've found ourselves grappling with alarming changes in church participation and attendance in recent years.

For four decades, we've served in volunteer positions in local churches while working fulltime with Group. And we've loved seeing God at



## DIVE DEEPER

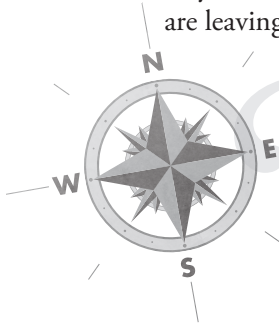
into this book with the enhanced digital version! You'll get videos and links that give you a firsthand understanding of *Why Nobody Wants to Go to*

*Church Anymore: And How 4 Acts of Love Can Make Your Church Irresistible.*

! Find discussion questions, a forum to share feedback, and more at [group.com/4-acts-of-love](http://group.com/4-acts-of-love).

work through the church. But as time has gone by, we've grown weary of the politics and thankless hours as faithful volunteers. Sadly, we've found more and more worship services void of joy and fulfillment.

There is no shortage of books that beat up the church. This isn't one of them. But it does take a hard look at what's really working...and what isn't. We ask some tough questions...and demand honest answers. That's why we've set out on this expedition: to explore the real reasons people are leaving the church in droves—and what can bring them back.



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We never would have agreed to walk this path if we'd known where the guides were taking us.

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We love exploration, so throughout this book we'll use some of our adventures around the world as parables to explain our ideas. Here's the first.

On a trip to Vanuatu (a group of islands in the Pacific) not too long ago, we found ourselves taking a journey into the unknown. Picture a completely black night in which you literally can't see your hand in front of your face. We rode inside a one-eyed pickup truck, lunging like a hungry bear over a rough road. The natives dropped us off near a stone-lined trail. We followed two lanky teenage guides wrapped in blankets to ward off the blustering wind. We hiked up, up, up...and then KABOOM! A deafening sound followed by an orange glow that lit up the rocky terrain around us. We were shocked to find ourselves standing inches from the edge of a boiling volcanic crater! We never would have agreed to walk this path if



we'd known where the guides were taking us. But now we would never trade that experience of witnessing the majesty and power of God's awesome creation. It was something very few get to experience—but there we were, toe to toe with one of the most powerful forces on the planet.

Willing to take the risk, we had followed our guides who'd been there many times before. And we lived to tell about it.

You're standing with us now on a similar edge. We may not be comfortable with the simmering cauldron beneath our feet. But if we're willing to face it—together—we'll get to explore something truly life changing.

# 1

## THE PROBLEM IS WORSE THAN YOU THINK

### It was clear **SOMETHING HAD GONE TERRIBLY WRONG.**

A church in upstate New York had offered its building to serve as a home base for hundreds of teenagers. Youth groups from all over the Northeastern U.S. had gathered for a week of service to the local community. A buzz of excitement filled the air as the kids and their leaders worked hard, worshipped together, and grew closer to one another.

As the Week of Hope team showed us the grand old facility, we admired its beautiful architecture and stained glass windows. The pastor—a likeable, cheerful man with an indelible smile—noted that this was the most activity the church had seen in years. He admitted that the church itself wasn't nearly as alive as this tired but motivated group of teens. We sensed an underlying sadness. When we saw the preschool room, we learned it had been more than a decade since the little chairs were filled with children. Before long the pastor revealed the heartbreaking reality: Not too long ago, this church had been thriving with nearly 1,000 members. But now they were lucky to get 30 people to show up on any given Sunday.

There may have been no visible cracks in the stained wood and polished marble halls of this historic house of worship, but this church was crumbling before their eyes.

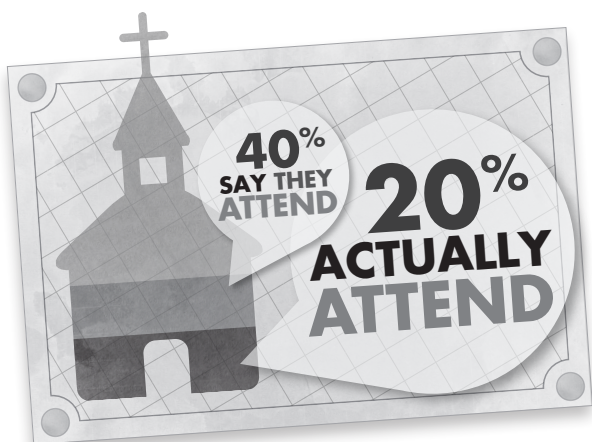
For updates on this church's story,  
visit [group.com/4-acts-of-love](http://group.com/4-acts-of-love).

This story broke our hearts. But what made it especially disheartening was that it was just one example of many. Shockingly, there are tens of thousands of similar stories about churches in various stages of stagnation or decline. *Perhaps as many as 200,000 American churches*, according to the latest statistics. Every year more than 4,000 of them close their doors forever.<sup>1</sup>

As sad as the story about this New York congregation may be, it's merely one small sign of an epidemic that's quietly and gradually sending the North American church into oblivion. Simply put, lots of people are leaving the church—many more people than you probably realize—and they're not coming back.

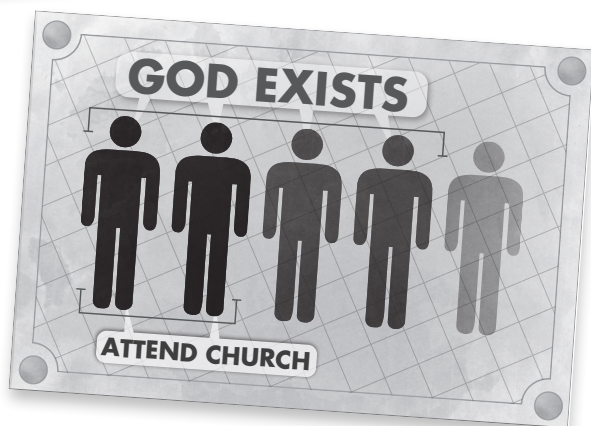
The problem is truly overwhelming. If you don't believe it, let us overwhelm you with some facts:

- Just over 350,000 churches dot the U.S. landscape. But only some small (less than 200) and some large (more than 2,000) churches are showing any growth. The vast middle is dwindling.<sup>2</sup>
- Churchgoers are getting older, on average, than the general population. The younger the generation, the higher the percentage that reports they are unaffiliated with a church.<sup>3</sup>



- Church attendance is shrinking. While 40 percent of Americans *say* they attend church every week, the actual number is more like 20 percent.<sup>4</sup>

- Four out of five Americans say they're sure God exists and identify themselves with a faith group. But less than half of them ever attend church.<sup>5</sup>



- Within five years, the percentage of congregations characterized by “high spiritual vitality” dropped from about 43 percent in 2005 to 28 percent in 2010.<sup>6</sup>
- In just five years, the percentage of teenagers attending church every week has dropped from 20 percent to 15 percent.<sup>7</sup>
- Giving is down in recent years—part of an ongoing decline.<sup>8</sup>
- In 2000, about a third (31 percent) of congregations exhibited “excellent” financial health, but by 2010 that number plummeted to 14 percent.<sup>9</sup>

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- Every year, more than 4,000 churches close their doors compared to approximately 1,000 new (and mostly very small) churches that start.<sup>10</sup>



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- Every year, 2.7 million church members fall into inactivity.<sup>11</sup>
  - From 1990 to 2000, the combined membership of all Protestant denominations in the U.S. declined by almost 5 million members (9.5 percent) while the U.S. population increased by 24 million (11 percent).<sup>12</sup>
  - Half of all churches in the U.S. did not add any new members to their ranks between 2010 and 2012.<sup>13</sup>

And all that’s just the tip of the statistical iceberg.

# WHY Does Nobody Want to Go to Church Anymore?

We've seen church people get tense, even angry, when we say, "Nobody wants to go to church anymore."

"Come on," they chide. "That's so negative. It's an exaggeration, and it's untrue. People still go to church."

True. A faithful few still do attend. But we're not the only ones taking notice of the alarming changes:

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“Christianity itself is in crisis. It seems no accident to me that so many Christians now embrace materialist self-help rather than ascetic self-denial—or that most Catholics, even regular churchgoers, have tuned out the hierarchy in embarrassment or disgust. Given this crisis, it is no surprise that the fastest-growing segment of belief among the young is atheism, which has leapt in popularity in the new millennium. Nor is it a shock that so many have turned away from organized Christianity and toward ‘spirituality,’ co-opting or adapting the practices of meditation or yoga, or wandering as lapsed Catholics in an inquisitive spiritual desert. The thirst for God is still there. How could it not be, when the profoundest human questions—*Why does the universe exist rather than nothing? How did humanity come to be on this remote blue speck of a planet? What happens to us after death?*—remain as pressing and mysterious as they’ve always been?

“That’s why polls show a huge majority of Americans still believing in a Higher Power. But the need for new questioning—of Christian institutions as well as ideas and priorities—is as real as the crisis is deep.”

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“The percentage of people that attend a Christian church each weekend is far below what pollsters report. According to both Gallup and Barna, 43% of American adults attend church on a typical weekend. But are people telling the truth about their behavior? Do people overestimate their church attendance when polled? Yes! The actual rate of attendance

from ‘head counts’ is less than half of what the pollsters report. Numbers from actual counts of people in orthodox Christian churches show that 18.7% of the population attended a Christian church on any given weekend in 2000.<sup>15</sup> ”

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“ [The large megachurches mask the church’s decline/death.] ‘You have Joel Osteen’s church with 20,000 or 30,000 people worshipping on an average weekend, and it just seems like religion is going great guns,’ [Kirk] Hadaway says. ‘I think it is creating a false impression of what is happening in the church. There are more giant churches now than there used to be—but at the same time, the average church is quite small. The decline among these small congregations has led to the death of a lot of churches. They have declining numbers and rising costs—insurance rates, pastors’ salaries, utilities—making it really tough for many churches across America.’<sup>16</sup> ”

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“ Young adults are leaving the church in record numbers, and experts wonder how many of them are ever coming back. LifeWay Research found seven in 10 Protestants ages 18 to 30 who went to church regularly in high school quit attending by age 23. A third of those had not returned by age 30. That means about one-fourth of young Protestants have left the church. The Barna Group says six in 10 young people will leave the church permanently or for an extended period starting at age 15. The 2012 Millennial Values Survey [...] found college-age millennials are 30 percent more likely than the general population to be religiously unaffiliated. [...] Just one in four says he or she attends religious services at least once a week, while 43 percent say they seldom or never attend. Nearly half of younger millennials still live with their parents, but those who live at home are no more likely to attend church than those who do not. [...] Pollsters fear current trends signal more than sowing wild oats. [...] Research suggests the main reason for disengaging from religion is [...] their faith simply does not seem relevant or important to their daily lives.<sup>17</sup> ”

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The church needs a wake-up call, just as we did.



*Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore* could have been titled *The Emperor Has No Clothes*. This book takes a deep, candid, and honest look in the mirror. And we may not like what we see.

It's like the shock when you open your eyes and see your body for what it really is. It's embarrassing. Maybe a bit disgusting. You feel ashamed that you let yourself go like this. You hope nobody's noticed. You sigh or gasp, grab that extra flab, and wonder, "What in the world has happened to me?" Jaron Tate, a contestant on *The Biggest Loser* likes to call it "sneaky fat." You wake up one morning and realize, "I don't look that good." Especially without any clothes on.



You feel ashamed that you let yourself go like this. You hope nobody's noticed. You sigh or gasp, grab that extra flab, and wonder, "What in the world has happened to me?"

Or maybe, like many people, you try to convince yourself that "I don't look all that bad. There are people worse off than me. Isn't there more to life than appearances, anyway? God only cares about what's on the inside, after all."

But, as we'll see, the inside isn't all that great, either.

**NOW WE SEE THINGS IMPERFECTLY,** like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then **WE WILL SEE EVERYTHING WITH PERFECT CLARITY.**

— 1 Corinthians 13:12

We, as the church, need to admit we don't look that good. When others see us, they're not all that attracted to us and wonder why we don't make some changes. For our own good—and for their good, too. But like those of us carrying around unhealthy poundage, we're looking for someone else to blame: McDonald's, Ben and Jerry's, potato chip manufacturers, giant sodas, commercials, oversized restaurant portions—hey, we're big-boned! Like the overweight, we in the church like to shift the responsibility to something or someone else: declining morality, Sunday sports, bad parenting, bad attitudes, lack of commitment, the media, technology, busy schedules, the economy, Satan, unstable global influences, the Internet....

**Stop! Blaming gets us nowhere. And it's pointing fingers in all the wrong directions.**

One thing we've learned at Group Publishing is to train all our leaders to speak the language of accountability. As a team, we read *The Oz Principle* together. It's all about building a culture of personal ownership and responsibility. We've learned a lot about how to address issues head on in a healthy, productive way.

The church must do this, too. And we've got to start by confessing that the church is broken.

Say it with us: “The church is broken.”

We in the church have a “sneaky fat” problem. We really do. We need to admit it together, and we need to work on it together. We need to take ownership of the problem. We can point fingers, dig in, and try to convince ourselves it's not that bad. Or we can take action.

This book is for those who want to understand why nobody wants to go to church anymore. But most of all, it's for those who want practical solutions to *do* something.

We're not alone. God is with us—and the Holy Spirit wouldn't mind being our personal trainer.

First, we've got some big questions to answer:

- Even though more than 90 percent of Americans say they believe in God, why did most of them avoid church last weekend?<sup>18</sup>
- Why are nearly one in five Americans checking “none” for their religious affiliation—the fastest growing, highest-ever documented segment?<sup>19</sup>



- 
- Why are researchers predicting that by 2020 more than 85 percent of Americans won't worship God at church?<sup>20</sup>
- 

- If 88 percent of adults say their faith is important to them, why do the majority of them choose not to grow their faith in church?<sup>21</sup>
- Why are nearly two-thirds (64 percent) open to pursuing their faith in an environment that's different from a typical church?<sup>22</sup>
- Last weekend most people in America avoided church. And a sizable portion who did make it to church wished they were somewhere else. Why?

Pause here.

Let's take a long, hard look in the mirror. If you're honest with yourself, you may have had your own share of struggles, strife, questions, and doubts about the church you love, too. If so, you're like the thousands of church leaders we encounter every week.

If you're like us, it grieves you.

## What This Book Is **REALLY ABOUT**

So, why do we care?

The hard truth is that maybe we *all* blew it. Us, too. As a publisher of Christian education resources, we may have gotten it all wrong.

About 20 years ago, we wrote a book called *Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church: And How to Fix It*. We wanted to be a catalyst to

revolutionize Christian education. And to our great surprise, much of the landscape of the way the church teaches the Bible, especially to teens and children, changed. It worked! People of all ages began experiencing the Bible as they never had before. It was a mini revolution!

But we now realize our laser focus on education was a distraction. That's because faith is *not* a subject.

Faith is a *relationship*.

Those four simple words compelled us to write this book. Think about that for a moment. *Faith is a relationship, not a topic to be studied.*

Once we understood that, our view of what happens at church changed. Completely. And it's opening doors we never even knew existed.

Remember, we love the church.

It's God's idea, God's people, God's church. And it's not going away. But the hard, honest truth tells us that the American church is growing increasingly irrelevant. Our church has become something that's easy to ignore. It's become something that fewer and fewer people want to be part of.

We can't help but wonder what needs to be done to keep this ship from sinking or drifting into obscurity.

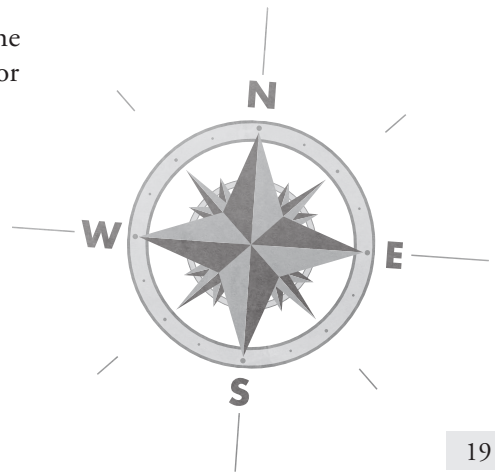
Join us in our journey of vulnerability and vision. We'll share what we learned when we took our own long, hard look in the mirror to discover why nobody wants to go to church anymore. And we'll explore some exciting ways that "4 ACTS OF LOVE" will make your church irresistible.

We've been astonished by what actually works.

You'll feel our angst and our joys as we had our ah-ha moments. We hope you have a few of your own along the way. And maybe, just maybe, you'll discover a renewed love and understanding for what the church—the bride of Christ—can really be.

We have a choice. We can stay the course and cling to the status quo...or we can choose to do something.

Let's do something.





**THIS IS A SAMPLE**  
**The number of pages is limited.**

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