

Disappearing Church (Part 1)

All Team Training — 05.31.16

What We Are Experiencing In The West

A Disappearance In The Church

*“In the West we are witnessing a number of disappearances. The ongoing disappearance of the Judeo-Christian worldview from Western culture. The disappearance of a large segment of believers, who across the Western world are leaving churches, walking away from active faith, or faith altogether during their young adult years... The disappearance of a mode of church engagement characterized by commitment, resilience, and sacrifice among many Western believers. **In its place a new mode of disengaged Christian faith and church interaction is emerging, This new mode is characterized by sporadic engagement, passivity, commitment phobia, and a consumerist framework.**” — Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church* (Pg. 7-8)*

*“Some churches, while keeping their theology and their traditional church structures alongside a strategy of making their communications, worship, and aesthetics culturally relevant, find themselves experiencing another kind of disappearance. The church as an entity stays and even grows in size and influence. Yet, the majority of its members disappear annually to be replaced by another class of attenders. The size of the church stays the same or even grows, yet the annual turnover of attendees can run at between 60-90 percent. Such turnover may be sustainable in the short term, but one must wonder how such an approach can work long-term. **Such churches are in danger of becoming what could be called flashmob churches: churches that are able to harness social networking and energy to gather an impressive crowd, but who soon disappear.**” — Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church* (Pg. 39-40)*

*“The disappearing churchgoer is not just restricted to successful, contemporary megachurches. Churches of all shapes, stripes, and sizes have seen people appear one day at the back of church like apparitions—sometimes alone, sometimes in groups—then disappearing, never to be seen again and causing inexplicable peaks and troughs in attendance records. **There were those who proudly proclaimed how much they loved their church and yet who were rarely around, who despite their intermittent attendance saw themselves as part of the fabric of their church. To them, regular attendance was turning up every six weeks. Then one day, as suddenly as they had luminously appeared, they disappeared.** No follow-up system, no pastoral calls, and no visitor cards could stop them from disappearing again into the dark.” — Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church* (Pg. 40)*

What We Are Experiencing In Western Culture

The Dominate Framework For Navigating Life

1. The highest good is individual freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression.
2. Traditions, religions, received wisdom, regulations, and social ties that restrict individual freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression must be reshaped, deconstructed, or destroyed.
3. The world will inevitably improve as the scope of individual freedom grows. Technology—in particular the Internet—will motor this progression toward utopia.
4. The primary social ethic is tolerance of everyone's self-defined quest for individual freedom and self-expression. Any deviation from this ethic of tolerance is dangerous and must not be tolerated. Therefore social justice is less about economic or class inequality, and more about issues of equality relating to individual identity, self-expression, and personal autonomy.
5. Humans are inherently good.
6. Large-scale structures and institutions are suspicious at best and evil at worst.
7. Forms of external authority are rejected and personal authenticity is lauded.

How Did We Get Here?

Late 19th Century to the Middle of the 20th Century → *Liberal Christianity won the leadership of the majority of the Western mainline denominations*

- *“These leaders saw liberal Christianity as the correct response to the rise of modernity.”*

What Was The Result? → *“The exact opposite occurred to what many had predicted: the churches that retained countercultural and transcendent elements and maintained orthodox theologies grew, while those who had abandoned central elements of Christian theology declined at spectacular rates.”*

The Ever-Present Effect On Our Culture? → *“Like a team of suicide bombers who obliterate themselves yet irrevocably change the cultural atmosphere, liberal Christianity has essentially destroyed itself as an ecclesiological, institutional force, yet has won the culture over to its vision of a Christianity reshaped for contemporary tastes.”*

- *“While cursory glances at our culture’s religious hue can give one the impression of atheism, we will soon see its liberal Christian residue. Following liberal Christianity’s lead, the majority of Westerners hold to a belief in a pleasant afterlife and a benevolent Christian-esque God. However, the doctrines of divine judgement and hell are ditches as repugantly retrograde. Concepts of personal morality and the pursuit of virtue are replaced by a desire for the communal good. The dogma of the kingdom of God and the New Jerusalem exists, but is reframed as the pursuit and possibility of a perfected, inclusive, civil society.”*

The Emergence Of A Post-Christian Culture

What Does A “Post-Christian” Culture Feel Like?

“Post-Christian culture attempts to retain the solace of faith, whilst gutting it of the costs, commitments, and restraints that the gospel places upon the individual will. Post-Christianity intuitively yearns for the justice and shalom of the kingdom, whilst defending the reign of the individual will. Post-Christianity is Christianity emptied of its content...” — Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church* (Pg. 16)

“What we are experiencing is not the eradication of God from the Western mind, but rather the enthroning of the self as the greatest authority.” — Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church* (Pg. 11)

Why People Are Leaving Church

*“Once we grasp that our post-Christian world is shaped by a liberal Christianity, we can understand better the phenomenon of church-leavers, especially amongst young adults. There have always been those who have left the church over doubts, just as there have always been those who left to pursue pleasure without account. When we understand that post-Christian culture offers a kind of alternative, liberal form of Christianity, we can see that many of these who leave don’t imagine that they are throwing themselves into an atheistic sea. Instead, they are retaining their faith, albeit in a reframed form. Half a century ago such people would have probably moved from conservative churches to more liberal mainline ones. **Now with the culture reflecting the values of the liberal mainline churches, one simply leaves the church.**”* — Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church* (Pg. 24)

The Church’s Current Posture Towards The Culture

*“For much of the last twenty years, a large segment of the church has taken a position of repentance of its past sins. It has become concerned about how it has appeared—exclusive, intolerant, close-minded, and judgmental. It has worried about how it has pushed its values on other cultures—told, not listened; lectured, not conversed. **Thus within Christianity in the West, a whole new posture has emerged, one that attempts to be more inclusive, more conversant, and more tolerant.** Much of this has been good. **Yet this move has occurred simultaneously with the culture becoming more prepared to condemn, judge, and speak in the language of right and wrong.**”* — Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church* (Pg. 38-39)

How Has The Culture In Our Cities Changed?

1. What does Post-Christianity look and feel like in our city?
2. What did people use to believe that they no longer believe?
3. What did people use to do that they no longer do anymore?
4. What are some of the “highest values” in our city currently?
5. What are some of the beliefs that are still held implicitly in our culture that actually have Christian roots?
6. How did churches use to engage cities that is now unhelpful in a Post-Christian context?