

Quitting Church: Why the Faithful Are Fleeing and What to Do about It

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Several recent studies reveal that churches are haemorrhaging, losing members at a life-threatening rate. Intrigued and disturbed by what appears to be an epidemic, Julia Duin amassed research on the issue, interviewing many who have left the church. These are her findings.

Quitting Church: Why the Faithful Are Fleeing and What to Do about It Details


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Laura says

This book was incredibly frustrating to read. It's basically a collection of interviews with quitters explaining why they quit. There's some value to that type of research. But it'd be nice if some wise soul came along and evaluated their answers, instead of just presenting the whole scatter shot mess as is. I was also nagged the whole time wondering if people really are the best judges as to why they do what they do, especially on this topic. Divorces are on the rise. Bowling leagues are on the decline. Maybe the biggest problem is that western society is full of quitters?

Mark says

This felt really "cut & paste" - as if Julia Duin had taken a number of articles & blog posts about church decline & slapped them together into a book. There are some brilliant insights here - particularly in how churches deal with singles - but her general cynicism about "seeker" churches and her longing for the charismatic go-go days of the Jesus Movement cast a pall over the book.

The "cut & paste" nature of the work (Ms. Duin is not only a reporter & religion editor but also a blogger of note) leads to another problem - if a pastor took to heart all of the advice she mentions positively, they would need to be a combination of Dr. Phil, Billy Graham, Superman & Steve Jobs in order to adequately perform.

She seems to have picked sides in the emerging/emergent church discussion as well - Mark Driscoll is pull-quoted & castigated for his complimentarian view of marriage (for the record, I'm not sure I completely agree with Driscoll, but his view is a bit more nuanced than presented in the book). OTOH, Brian McLaren is quoted as an expert without any reference to his critics.

I think my primary reaction to this book is simply that she spends 180 pages detailing the flight of the faithful from American churches - and suggests only broad-stroke non-answers rather than specific recommendations for action. I don't dispute her findings - she's in a far better position than I am to see what's going on across denominations. What I question is the worth of a book like this which depresses rather than inspires.

Troy says

If you're looking for formulas, suggestions, or quick fix answers for what to do about the civ that looks like a back door to the American church, this probably isn't your book. While I can't say that I agree with her assessments of what subsets of people are leaving the church and why, or her outlook on what would constitute a "quality" expression of church ministry (Duin's view of a local ministry as a solid expression of ministry expression is suspect based on my own first-hand knowledge of the same ministry), I did appreciate her willingness to name the elephant in the room. I'm coming to appreciate those who are unafraid of giving a name, and sometimes even a face, to the problems of the church... especially since they do actually exist!

Duin's book is not for the overly optimistic, those who see nothing wrong with the church, or those who would rather justify and defend the problem of a mass exodus from the American Church by mature, intellectual, disciplined, and gifted driven men and women of faith. Duin's strength of argument is particularly in the chapters dealing with singles and women in church, but her assertions regarding pastoral engagement, competence, teaching quality, the lack of spiritual power, and the inability of the church as it is to continue on the work of the mature Christian have plenty of weight and should be considered deeply.

In the end, I don't believe Duin ever intends to give permission for people to leave their churches (especially since it's written for and to pastors), but she does give a voice to the experience of so many. I know she gave voice to my frustrations and has helped me to articulate why my own personal exodus, which started long before this book was published, had to happen.

Doug Sullivan says

Interesting but disjointed. Read for what it's worth--a quick, yet incomplete snapshot of the state of local church. Excellent points regarding the needs of the different segments of the flock and the impossible challenge of any pastor/teacher/leader (very few of these, to be sure) to appeal to all of them.

I am in full time ministry and have observed that Christians, not long after conversion and initial growth and stabilization of their faith, become so ego-centric in their needs connecting them (or not) to a local church. When did we become so hard to please, when we serve a God so beyond our imagination? Those whom Duin sites as leaving the church dissatisfied and bored are like the suitor saying to his date, "I love your face (Christ), but its your body I can't stand (local expression of faith and worship)." Any body of believers is imperfect and will always disappoint to some degree. When did we begin to hold our churches to such an impossible standard?

Erin says

I've come full circle with this book: liked it, hated it, liked it again. I was particularly fond (and highly recommend) the chapters "Is the Pastor the Problem?" and the one about women in the church. The "singles" chapter is really complex and heartbreaking in a lot of ways, highly relateable.

I think if anyone has had difficulty in the church they might find some comfort in these pages that they, unfortunately, are not alone and that the individual in exodus is not necessarily the "rebellious", "troubled" person they are often labeled as when they leave a church (if anyone notices they've left at all).

There's not much to the "what to do about it" part of the subtitle, but the intelligent and humble church goer will be able to see the identified problems and see the solutions on their own. Mainly, treating people with respect, avoiding cliques, avoiding making the pastor the king, and making a church a place for everyone, not just a particular demographic.

Debbie Phillips says

Warning... this is a very long review... I hope some of you will read it all.

Hmmmmmm.

There were some chapters that I liked a lot and agreed with totally. There were other chapters I thought were completely off track. And there were some chapters with some I agreed with and some I didn't.

My husband and I, and our children, left our church in October of 2012 after 16 years there. I have been saved since I was a young girl, my husband has been saved since he was in high school. My children were saved at young ages. They have been in church all their lives except for a few years after a bad church experience when my daughters were very young. The boys had been in the same church all their lives.

So... I was interested in what Julia Duin had to say.

"...plenty of people in this country are interested in spiritual matters. They are simply not going to church to feed this interest." (pg 13) I agree. Count us in that number now. I read my Bible and pray. I read spiritual books. I listen to Christian music that I like.

We did not come from a charismatic background like the author did so many things she writes about the charismatics I don't agree with and don't apply to our situation. My husband and I, I read this aloud to him, had many, many discussions because of this book.

"...many people I encountered were disappointed or perplexed in some way with God. They'd been Christians for more than a decade, and some had experienced serious suffering. The more honest ones admitted something was not working in their Christian faith. They were not connecting with god as to the reason for their sorrows; in fact God seemed to be confounding their prayers. Their churches were useless in giving meaningful counsel..." pg 22

Yup.

"There's a flight out there, but no one at church is willing to go to the mat for each other," she said. "finally you get tired and wonder if God is going to come through for you. The body of Christ is not standing by each other when we have a real need." pg 54

Yup.

One of the things I didn't agree with was her view on women. Maybe women are leaving some churches because of the things she mentioned but not me... not my church. She says the church needs to be careful how they treat the men and then contradicts herself in the chapter on women. I don't believe women should be leaders over men in the church. So there are many things on this account that I disagree with her on.

The chapter on singles is very open and honest. She talks about sexuality, homosexuality, and more. For young ladies, and men, who are trying to keep their minds and bodies pure they should avoid this chapter or avoid the book.

I did like her insights on helping men and women find each other and get married. She says the church is making things more difficult for singles. Though families are encouraged, men are not encouraged to find a women, make a commitment to her, get married and stay faithful. A pastor from India said, "... in his country, Christians assume everyone is to be married, unless they have a specific call from God to stay single. Pastors like him, he said, take it on themselves to find Christian makes for the singles in their congregation."

She also says, "if prayer helps singles find mates, then is there an opposite force out there working at keeping them alone?" Yes, I believe there is... Satan.

Here is another quote I agree with. "The accusation is that we're backsliding, but the fact is, we are living a richer Christian experience than ever. It's mature Christians who have opted out of church." pg 170 That is certainly true of me. I feel closer to the Lord... most days. I still have days in when I struggle, but most of the time it is short lived.

"...if something goes wrong or you've lost a job or there's sickness, you're told, 'You need to learn to pray better' or 'Something is wrong with you.'" pg. 176.

In our church those who are sick are surrounded by prayer warriors and support. but job loss... and loooong unemployment were not understood. We were not supported spiritually, emotionally. We were helped financially for a few months but then they "cut us off". It is there policy.

I know God has met our needs in the past. **God** is meeting our needs without our church. The church can be one of the ways God meets needs, but if they are unwilling God will provide in other ways.

So... there are some good things about this book, and some things I don't agree with. She holds up home churches as a possible solution, though has some friends who tried that and after a time their home church turned into the same kind of church... looking to build and get bigger... like the churches they had fled.

The best thing about this book was the discussion it produced with my husband and I. We talked and talked about many things. She may not have a foolproof solution but bringing the problems into the open so people can discuss them is better than covering things up.

If you think your church is perfect then you probably won't want to read this. If you, or those you love, are having troubles... or you see problems in your church, this book will certainly help you discuss things... even if you, like I, don't agree with it all.

Dave McNeely says

What I especially appreciated about Duin's book, in contrast to many other works that approach the question of waning commitment to organized religion in the U.S., is her focus on those who seem religiously devoted but have left the institutional church BECAUSE of their devotion. I wish, however, that Duin would have brought a little more sociological insight to her journalistic approach and really plumbed the reasons WHY this is happening here and now.

Elizabeth Vasquez says

Insightful but a tad bit redundant and long-winded.

Leanne says

An interesting book about why the faithful are leaving church. Some of the reasons given - don't feel like they belong; services seem like entertainment rather than worship; music is not worshipful, but rather loud and unsingable; services seem dumbed-down. Mature Christians want to be challenged and sermons don't take them to the next level. They feel like no one in the church cares about their personal needs.

The author has done years of research, interviews and even attended several churches in the many areas of the country. Her conclusions seem real and not contrived. This would be a good read for all pastors.

Stven says

The author has a steady, readable style that got me through even the first part of the book where I felt she was piling kind of a large stack of statistics on the fire.

Church participation has gone way down in the last couple of decades in America. Partly this is because with each passing generation, fewer and fewer people are Christians -- 65% of the WWII generation, 35% of baby boomers, an anticipated 5% of today's teenagers -- but it's also because Christians are finding less and less value in the modern church. If you are one of these Christians, you can probably subscribe to one or more of the reasons given by the polling so extensively reported here: People are not being given the spiritual nourishment they seek at churches perpetually geared to entry-level Christians. People -- especially women -- are being discouraged from taking church leadership (not just ordained) roles even when highly qualified. More and more people are finding themselves marginalized by churches organized around the 9-to-5 Leave It To Beaver nuclear family lifestyle. Pastors burn out and/or flame out.

I didn't really feel like she tells the reader "What to Do about It." She visits and describes a variety of efforts made by churches to attract people by not being too much like church and being more like variety shows, coffeehouses, etc., but the success of such churches seems to be limited and short-lived. She illuminates the issues but leaves the reader with the impression that this is a fast downward spiral which no one has yet figured out how to stop.

Timothy Maples says

Ms. Duin's book is a good overview of why many still-believing Evangelicals stop attending church. She arranges her study by affected groups, such as Charismatics, Emergents, women and singles. She also deals with pastors as cult personalities, an affliction that has killed many a congregation.

The strongest chapter in the book deals with singles. Ms. Duin questions the mindset of churches that do not meet the needs of singles or deal with their spiritual concerns. She correctly condemns the refusal of pastors to address sexual longing in real terms and wonders, if marriage is the normal state for Christians, why do churches not attempt to find mates for unattached members? This chapter alone is worth the cost of the book.

Other sections of the book contain interesting insights, even if I do not agree with Ms. Duin's conclusions. Her chapter on women, for example, is correct in pointing out how they have often been used as churchly cannon-fodder fit to be mere nursery workers or kiddie teachers, but this can be fixed without resorting to the

solutions proposed by secular modernity.

If you are not Pentecostal or Charismatic, you may be put off by the author's occasional longing for the spiritual excitement of the Jesus Movement of the '70's, but don't let that theological quirk deprive you of the benefit of the rest of this well-written book.

Eric Dunn says

This was a well written book. It focused most on Baptists and Evangelicals, but that's ok. It had some great things to say about small group ministry and the role that it plays in the church. It said that small groups are a great way to know when people are falling through the cracks at church. In a small group people notice that you are missing, whereas in a large group setting it is easier for the fact that someone is gone from church to go unnoticed. There was also some interesting stats on why folks are leaving churches. The most talked about reason in the book was because they felt like their church wasn't catering to their needs as much as they thought they should be. Overall, I think that someone from any denominations can glean some valuable insights that they can put to good use in their congregational setting.

Paul says

First of all; this was a disturbing book. I'm not much of a fan of books written by research institutes because I fear the fallout of how their data will influence what the church does. Remember when research data came out and said that church members are only giving their church 1 to 2 hours a week? What did churches start doing in response to that kind of data. We believed it and began dropping our meeting times and day, because a research institute told us that's why attendance was down. Then research institutes are prone to promote a programed agenda (published and sold by them) that will solve the exodus from our churches. We are still fighting our way out of the music wars (maybe they've always been around) in our worship services because research told us that lost people don't like our music (are the people in our churches really opposed to a drum set or guitar, a key-board or organ, with music or without music; or are they mostly told that there is a problem and so they begin believing there is a problem?) What happened to abiding by the River. Isn't that where life abounds?

Second of all; this book was not written by a research institute. Julia Duin (Religion Editor, the Washington Times) sites research institutes (Barna, LifeWay, etc.) and then found that much of the trends that are being discovered by the research institutes are accurate, but mostly because churches (and denominations) are moving farther away from their roots (changing) and becoming less church-like and more nonprofit-like (my words, not Julia Duin's) in our organization.

Is it possible that the growing trend in America of 'Quitting Church' is because the church is not being the church? If you get the chance to read this book, I recommend it. I didn't agree with some of Julia Dain's observations but the overall observation, from a non-research-institute was insightful.

Does the church even know where the river is anymore?

Karla Goforth Abreu says

It is true that the church is in a state of transition. This happens at times of cultural change and because of technology and information progressing rapidly as never before, change is happening faster. The percentages of those leaving church are higher than at any other time in history, according to the author and the pollsters.

The writing style is extremely readable and the author writes, often, from her own frustrating views. She has issues with organized church and it seems she basically tells stories of others with issues who either drop out or form their own groups. The reasons are varied and may or may not be legitimate. Should the church be concerned and take action? Yes, but the author offers very little in a true directional sense.

The book contains contradictions and faulty premises. I have noted several arguments with the material that are too lengthy to tackle in this review. The church is facing challenges and I believe a better book on the topic is John S. Dickerson's *The Great Evangelical Recession*. Yet, while we are facing a time of unprecedented trouble, God is sovereign and the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, for God has always had a people.

Jeff Zell says

Duin, Julia. *Quitting Church: Why the Faithful Are Fleeing and What to Do about It*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.

People are opting out of participating in formal church. Folks have been making this choice for quite some time now. After WWII, there was a huge surge in church attendance. Then beginning in the 1960's a drop in attendance continued to grow. Now, churches that have older folks in them are discovering that the younger generation is not rushing through the doors to take the older generation's place in the pew. Last year, a report was released that when forms for institutions like hospitals are filled out that when the question is asked "religious preference" more people than ever are checking "none." The nones are the fastest growing religious group in America right now.

For those who are concerned about the future of the church in America, the question "why" is inevitably asked. Why are people leaving church? And, why are people not interested in going to church? The two questions are related. Duin focuses primarily on the question of why people are leaving the church.

Duin has a theology degree and is a religion reporter who has written for a number of newspapers and periodicals. As of this book's publication, she is the religion editor of *The Washington Times*. According to her website she is now working elsewhere.

So, why are people leaving the church? As Duin addresses the problem, there clearly is no one reason. Her chapter titles show some of the major reasons. She addresses issues such as relevancy, community inclusion, congregations realistically addressing modern issues and concerns, how the church deals, or not, with singles over the age of 35, lack of depth and substance in teaching/preaching, Pastors and the church system, how women are addressed, and charismatics.

Duin's research involves her own and friends' personal experience, newspaper accounts, professional and academic resources. Her emphasis is on the Evangelical church although she does touch on the dynamics of sacramental communions as well. Duin does have a personal stake in this question. She is a single person, now a single mother, over the age of 35 who is a professional woman who expects respect and substance. She has quit church too. As of the writing of her book, she decided she wanted her child to be in Sunday School so attends an evangelical congregation. She finds the experience for herself to be unsatisfactory. She argues in her final chapter that the answer she finds most appealing is the home church movement. In the home church, personal interaction with others is a premium experience.

I read this book because I would like to know why people are leaving. I am a pastor of the church but even if I weren't, my family would be active in a congregation. So, I am genuinely puzzled when people choose to remove themselves from church life. I understand the need to switch congregations or even confessional alliances, but I do not understand walking away completely. I did not learn anything new here.

Duin is strong on describing the surface of problems people deal with, but weak in solid recommendations for bringing people back. She also does not go the extra step and explain why people are treating church as if it is a restaurant. Her analysis does not address the consumer mentality that she and others bring to the church. She also lacks the conviction that the church and Christ are inseparable. One must be a part of the body of Christ (aka: the church) in order to be a Christian.
