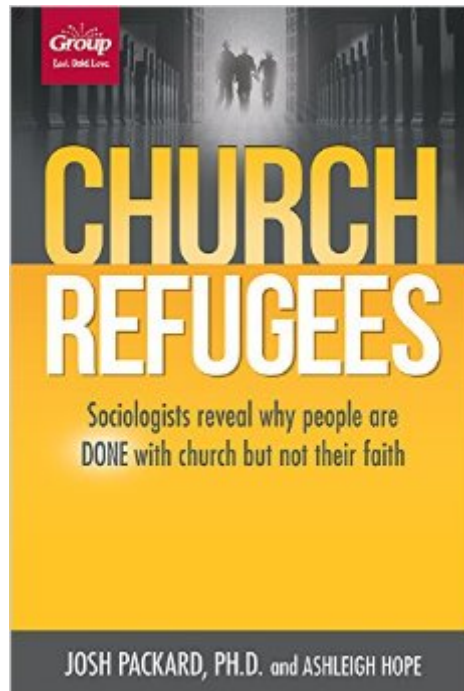


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Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are DONE With Church But Not Their Faith



Synopsis

As millions of church members fall into inactivity each year, they've probably also started skipping church on Sunday. We need answers—not statistics. We need to understand and hear from people who are leaving church so we can find a way to turn around the trend. This book uses in-depth sociological research to get to the heart of the issue. The data is collected from interviews with real people about why they left and who they really are. These aren't the "nones" who have no religious affiliation. They're the "dones" who've been faithfully serving in local churches for years. This is their story.

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Customer Reviews

Few books have disturbed me as much as Josh Packard's Church Refugees. Many of us have become familiar with the "Nones" (those who select "none" when asked their religious affiliation) and their increase over the past 20 years. Packard describes a different, trending phenomenon: "The Dones," those who have decided their spiritual lives are better off lived outside organized religion. Packard unveils what many of us in Churchworld have been experiencing as a trickle for years: the most committed church attenders—"those who have given most, prayed longest, served for years, and have been in the most important meetings"—are the ones leaving our churches. After a year of qualitative research, conducting a hundred interviews, Packard concludes that the Dones are not leaving because they hate God or Christ's priorities; the Dones uniformly report that they are

leaving church to save their faith. Packard argues the church in America is not the European model, and its death will not be due to stagnation. America is an innovative society, but if the American church cannot keep its most committed, devoted, and energetic followers, then it's destined to become a greatly diminished social force. This is no small observation. When analyzing the Nones is like looking at a severe burn that on the surface looks bad but over time may heal, the Dones are like a diagnosis of cancer. Some of the people most essential for the American church's lasting health are leaving and the reasons are documented and would require major systemic change. Note, the Dones are not the free-riders. They are the folks who showed up every week and gave regularly, and they are not leaving because of the apparent dominance of conservative theology or well-publicized sex scandals. Rather, Packard summarizes, the story of the dechurched is a story of modern religious organizations and institutions stifling people's ability to engage with each other and their community. So why are the Dones leaving? Packard argues, "The Dones say they left because of the judgmental posture of church people individually and collectively which assaulted the communal experience they longed for. The Dones say they left because they are tired of trying to serve Jesus through the bureaucratic methods of church organizations which stifled progress and often gave little attention to what they cared for most. Many wished to build the Kingdom but were only offered opportunities to build someone's church empire. The Dones say they left because they want to answer questions about God through dialogue and struggle, not through prepackaged lectures and the predetermined positions of their community. And the Dones say they left because their church only understood morality in terms of substance abuse and sexual activity with a common disregard to systemic issues of equality, poverty and unjust economics. Note, Packard is not a progressive commentator. Packard is a sociologist presenting data from interviews. He is not advancing his own gripes about church life (he presently attends and is active in a church). Instead, his book outlines what those who have already left say about why they left and why they are not likely to return. As a practitioner, this is the most challenging book I've read in some time and churches like mine "what may be termed emerging churches" are not immune. Normally when reading books on the failures of Churchworld, I am part of the critics circle, but not here. Packard puts his finger on spots my church and most of those I know deeply struggle.

This book is a sociological report on The Dones: people who have been active in church life but have removed themselves from the institutional church. Drawing on about 100 interviews with people who were even in staff positions and no longer active in church, there are some important

patterns that emerge. They placed a high value on community, on mission, and on authenticity. But over time, it seemed that the institutional church made these lofty goals difficult if not impossible to achieve. Those who left church were not likely to do so because of theological differences but because they weren't allowed a safe place to discuss differences. This is an important distinction. It's not that they didn't believe Christian doctrine but wanted to explore its ramifications rather than being preached at. This circles back to issues of authentic community. When this is missing, when people can't find expression for their missional passions, when church leadership engages in oversimplification or hypocrisy, the costs of remaining become far too great. In reading the book, I was struck with the notion that the denial of authenticity may have exponential cost structures—each infraction magnifies the ones that have gone before. Every squelching of community creates a deeper longing for that one community that meant so much. I want to underscore that the respondents in Church Refugees bear absolutely no resemblance to the characterizations so easily made by bloggers (not me) about people who want an easy faith and simply drift away because postmodernity is easier. These folks struggled. They had a vision of what the church could and should be and worked hard to make that happen. In the final instance, they simply determined that the escalating costs were too great to bear. One of my takeaways from the book is to ponder how many "near Refugees" exist in local congregations. How many people in the congregation are "one more thing" from making the decision to disinvest? For all of the bloggers' suppositions about "casual Christians", the resources for strengthening the local congregation, and therefore the impact of religion on society, may be right under our noses. Research like Josh and Aimee have done is the next frontier of understanding the sociology of religion. As we get a better handle on the beliefs and behaviors of real people in real conversations, we'll have a more robust sense of how faith works in this postmodern, complex, society. It's quite likely that such research, rather than simply giving interpretations to shifting demographic patterns, will allow us to grasp the resilience of God's work in a changing society.

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