

Conversation #2

HOW DO WE RESPOND AS PEOPLE ATTEND CHURCH LESS OFTEN?

In chapter 1, we talked about how you can make a lot of internal change but still struggle to see your church grow. Maybe that's where you are as a church. You're basically healthy, your church is structured for growth, and you are committed to reaching people outside your walls, but you're sensing that growth and even effectiveness in your mission are more difficult than they used to be.

You're not alone. What you'll discover, even if you're successful in leading more people than ever before into a relationship with Jesus, is that people are simply attending church less frequently. Everywhere I go I talk to pastors who are experiencing the same thing: *people who attend church are attending less often*. People who used to attend every week are attending three times a month. People who were around twice a month often now show up once a month or less. And attenders who used to come once a month are showing up half a dozen times a year. This is true of rapidly growing churches, megachurches, midsized churches, and Bible churches. It's a massive cultural shift.

It's interesting how quickly things have shifted. When I started in ministry in the mid-90s, if someone didn't attend church for a while, it was almost always because they had left. It made running into people in the grocery store a bit awkward, as they really didn't want to tell you they had moved on. Today when I run into people I haven't seen at our church in weeks or months, they tell me they *love* our church and that they can't wait to get back at some point. It doesn't even occur to them that in the recent past someone might have guessed they left. They haven't left at all; they just haven't been lately.

In this chapter, we'll look at some reasons that's happening and then begin to plot out a strategy, first looking at the characteristics of today's unchurched people and infrequent attenders (they're quite similar), and then at some more practical suggestions of how to approach and engage people. Please know this is a relatively new conversation in many church circles. That's compounded by the fact that our culture is changing faster than ever before as we move from a Christian culture to a post-Christian culture in North America. That said, I believe it's incredibly important to *have* this conversation anyway. New and innovative approaches will emerge from these conversations that will move the mission forward in a new generation. So I encourage you to have the conversation despite its lack of definition. I hope this chapter will provide a framework for it and some food for thought.

Let me clarify two things first. Yes, the church is bigger than simply Sunday mornings, but this chapter focuses on the issue of church service attendance. Second, mere church *attendance* is never the goal. But attendance is a sign of something deeper that every church leader is going to have to wrestle with over the next few years. And it continues to be a pivotal part of how the church in the West gathers even today.

11 REASONS WHY EVEN COMMITTED CHURCH ATTENDERS ARE ATTENDING LESS OFTEN

The first key to addressing what's happening is to *understand* what's happening.

Why are even committed attenders attending less often? There are at least eleven reasons.

1. Greater Affluence

Money gives people options. If your church is engaging the middle class, the upper middle class, or a suburban demographic at all, an interesting trend is developing. The middle class is shrinking, but it's shrinking (in part) because more of the middle class is becoming *upper* class.⁷ Both U.S. and Canadian personal disposable incomes are at all-time highs.⁸ There are simply more affluent people than there were decades ago, which may in part explain why so many “average” people indulge their obsessions with granite countertops, designer homes, and new cars, even without being megawealthy.

Naturally, this leaves a huge theological void in ministry to and with the poor, but it helps explain what's actually happening in the suburbs and increasingly with the reurbanization of many cities as the affluent move back downtown. Please, I'm not arguing that things *should* be this way. I'm simply pointing out that this seems to be what's happening.

Again, people with money have options: for technology, for travel, and for their kids. And, arguably, that affluence may be one of the factors moving them further away from a committed engagement to the mission of the local church. It's perhaps fueling some of the other reasons outlined below.

2. Increased Focus on Kids' Activities

A growing number of kids are playing sports. And a growing number of kids are playing on teams that require travel. Many of those sports happen on weekends, and affluent parents are choosing sports over church.

3. More Travel

Despite a wobbly economy, travel is on the rise, both for business and for pleasure.⁹

More and more families of various ages travel for leisure, even if it's just out of town to go camping, visit friends, or spend a weekend at the lake. And when people are out of town, they tend not to be in church. This is true not just for families and business travelers but also for retired adults. Travel has quickly become a staple of many people's retirement plans.

4. A 24-7 Culture

Having to “work the weekend” was unusual a few decades ago, but now it's normal for a growing number of workers. Weekend shift work is no longer just normal for emergency and health care workers; factory workers, retail workers, and even some white-collar workers work weekends. We have become a 24-7 culture. The idea of a common pause day—let alone a Sabbath—is a distant memory.

Although Sunday morning is still arguably the best time of the week to gather a crowd, Sunday mornings do not provide the universal opportunity they used to provide.

5. Blended and Single-Parent Families

Fortunately, more and more blended families and single-parent families are finding a home in church. So how does this translate into attendance patterns? Church leaders need to remember that when custody is shared in a family situation, “perfect” attendance for a kid or teen might be twenty-six Sundays a year. Similarly, while the affluent might not be in church because of *access* to reliable

transportation, single parents (who, not always, but often struggle more financially) might not be in church because they *lack access* to reliable transportation.

So here's the strange twist. People who *have* a car are often not in church *because* they have a car. People who *want* to be in church are often *not* in church because they *don't* have a car or because it's not their "weekend" for church. Sadly, many people who want to get to church simply can't.

6. Online Options

Churches are also launching online campuses that bring the entire service to you on your phone, tablet, or TV. Churches that may not have the resources to create an entire online campus or experience are still establishing a social media presence. Many also podcast their messages. As we'll see later in this chapter and again in chapter 6, there are pros and cons to online church, and there's also little doubt that churches with a strong online presence have seen it negatively impact physical attendance (but likely increase their reach). Whether or not your church has online options doesn't make the issue go away. Anyone who attends your church has free access to any online ministry of any church. Online church is here to stay, whether you participate in it or not.

7. The Cultural Disappearance of Guilt

When I grew up, I felt guilty about not being in church on a Sunday. The number of people who feel guilty about not being in church on Sunday shrinks daily. As I mentioned earlier, I regularly meet people who haven't been in months but say they *love* our church. If you're relying on guilt as a motivator, you need a new strategy. (Well, honestly, you've always needed a new strategy.) Unchurched people don't feel any more guilty about not being in church on Sunday than you feel guilty about not being in synagogue on Saturdays. How many Saturdays do you feel bad about missing synagogue? That's how many Sundays they feel bad about missing church.

8. Self-Directed Spirituality

People are looking less to churches and leaders to help them grow spiritually and more to other options. We live in an era in which no parent makes a visit to a doctor's office without having first Googled the symptoms of a child's illness and a recommended course of treatment. Just ask any family physician. It drives them crazy. (Google, doctors will tell you, is not a complete replacement for medical school.) Similarly, when was the last time you bought a car without completely researching it online? In an age when we have access to everything, more and more people are self-directing their spirituality—for better or for worse.

Similarly, another characteristic of the postmodern mind is a declining trust of and reliance on institutions. The church in many people's minds is seen as an institution. I don't actually believe that's what a church is; I think it's a movement, not an institution. But many churches behave like institutions, and the postmodern mind instinctively moves away from them and toward a personalized spirituality as a result.

9. Failure to See a Direct Benefit

People always make time for the things they value most. If they're not making time for church, that tells you something. Even among people who say they love the church and who say they love *your* church, if declining attendance is an issue, chances are it's because they don't see a direct benefit. They don't see the value in attending church week after week. That could be because there isn't much value (gut check). Or it could be because there is value that they simply don't see.

Either way, failure to see a direct benefit always results in declining engagement.

So what are you doing or not doing that leaves people feeling there's not that much value?

10. Valuing Attendance Over Engagement

When someone merely *attends* church, the likelihood of showing up regularly or even engaging their faith decreases over time. At our church, I find our most engaged people— people who serve, give, invite, and who are in a community group—are our most frequent attenders. More and more as a leader, I value engagement over attendance. Ironically, leaders who value attendance over engagement will see declining attendance.

11. A Massive Culture Shift

All of these trends witness to something deeper. Our culture is shifting. Seismically.

Church leaders who fail to recognize this will not be able to change rapidly enough to respond to the shifts that are happening. Change is unkind to the unprepared, so prepare.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TODAY'S UNCHURCHED PERSON

Teams that truly want to connect with infrequent attenders and unchurched people need to come to terms with how radically mind-sets are changing as our culture is changing. There are a few books that do a great job outlining the shifting mind-set in great detail; it's perhaps helpful here to outline a few of the shifts that have been observed.¹⁰

In my two decades in ministry, I've seen a big shift in how unchurched people think. Perhaps the view in Canada is a little different from that in other regions in North America. Canada is a bit of a hybrid between the United States and Europe. Canadians are less churched and more post-Christian than many Americans but less secular than Europeans. Postmodernism has a deeper foothold here than in almost any place in America except perhaps the Northwest and New England, where it might be about the same. The characteristics outlined below challenge assumptions that many church leaders have held (or still hold) about how infrequent attenders or unchurched people feel about themselves and about the church.

They don't all have big "problems." If you're waiting for unchurched people to show up because their lives are falling apart, you might wait a long time. Sure, there are always people in crisis who seek God out. But many are quite content with their lives without God. And some are quite happy and successful. If you only know how to speak into discontent and crisis, you will miss most of your neighbors.

Most are spiritual. Most unchurched people believe in some kind of God. They're surprised and offended if you think of them as atheists.

They are not sure what "Christian" means. So you need to make that clear. You really can't make any assumptions about what people understand about the Christian faith. Moving forward, clarity is paramount.

You can't call them back to something they never knew. Old-school "revival" meant there was

something to revive. Now that we are on the second to fifth generation of unchurched people, revival is less helpful, to say the least. You can't call them back to something they never knew. This should cause us to radically rethink our assumptions about ministry and culture.

Many have tried church, even a little, but left. At Connexus, where I serve, we have a good chunk of people who have never, ever been to church, but a surprising number of people have tried church at some point—as a kid or a young adult. Because it wasn't a good experience, they left. Remember that. It influences their biases and expectations.

They want you to be Christian. Unchurched people and people on the fringes of your church actually want you to follow Jesus authentically. Think about it: if you were going to convert to Buddhism, you would want to be an authentic Buddhist, not some watered-down version. Andy Stanley is 100 percent right when he says you don't alter the content of your services for unchurched people, but you should change the experience.¹¹

They're intelligent, so speak to that. Don't speak down to people who are new. Just make it easy to get on the same page as people who have attended church for years by saying things like, "This passage is near the middle of the Bible." You can be inclusive without being condescending.

They hate hypocrisy. Enough said. Give it up. Change.

They love transparency. When you share your weaknesses, everyone relates (including Christians). People admire your strengths, but they identify with your weaknesses.

They invite their friends if they like what they're discovering. Ironically, new or infrequent attenders can become your best inviters if they love what you're doing. Because they are generally more plugged into the wider community than many Christians, it's easy for them to invite many friends to join them if at some point the gospel begins to resonate more deeply.

Their spiritual growth trajectory varies dramatically. One size does not fit all. You need a flexible on-ramp that allows people to hang in the shadows for a while as they make up their minds and one that allows multiple jumping-in points throughout the year.

Some want to be anonymous and some don't. Some unchurched people come in craving immediate connection and community. Others want to sit at the back, unnoticed, until they're ready to make a move. One size no longer fits all in greeting guests. Make your church friendly to both groups.

DEVELOPING A BETTER APPROACH TO INFREQUENT ATTENDERS AND UNCHURCHED PEOPLE

It's one thing to understand why people attend infrequently or stay away almost altogether, but it begs another question. How do you interact with them? What should your approach be when you connect with them?

By far, I believe the best response to infrequent attenders is simply this: you embrace them. I use the word *embrace* on purpose. There's something deep-seated in many of us that wants to reject

people if we sense they're rejecting us. And people not coming to church much on Sunday can feel like rejection to an insecure church leader. (Which, by the way, is many of us on this side of heaven.) And unchurched people can initially seem so different in their attitudes, approaches, and even appearances from Christians who have been in the church all their lives.

In light of these dynamics, what do you do? You change your approach. What follows are different approaches and some new strategies that can help us bridge the gap as we move from a Christian era into a post-Christian era.

Show empathy.

Many of today's church leaders grew up in church. We remember a time when going to church was simply the thing you did every Sunday. And as church leaders or volunteers, it's what we *still* do every Sunday. So at times it can be a little hard to empathize with people who don't see things the way we see them.

Personally, I think participating in the mission of a great church weekly (including Sundays) is one of the best things a Christian can do. Unless I'm fooling myself, I think this is a personal conviction, not just a vocational conviction. If I stopped doing vocational ministry tomorrow, I would still want to participate weekly in the mission of a local church, including the Sunday ministry. But just because I see it that way doesn't mean everyone sees it that way. And here's the danger: if you start judging people for not seeing it your way, you will almost certainly turn them off. People—especially teens and young adults—can smell judgment a mile away. Judgment always creates barriers.

Empathizing with irregular attenders is not that hard to do if you realize you probably have an attitude about other organizations that mirrors their attitude toward your church. Take going to the gym, for example. I have a gym membership. Truthfully, as I write this chapter, I haven't been there in two and a half months. My attendance at the gym is less than stellar.

But my goal isn't actually attendance at the gym. My goal is fitness. So I spin on my bike trainer at home, do push-ups, and hike. I watch what I eat and I do other exercise. The gym is a means to an end, and it's not the only means for me. Am I going to make the cover of next month's *Muscle Magazine*? Well, they haven't called me yet. But that's not my goal.

Many people think the same way about church, especially unchurched people. If a formerly unchurched person shows up twelve times a year, that's far more than they've ever been in church! They might actually think they're doing great, and maybe they are, compared to how they used to feel and behave spiritually. So rather than judging them for it, tell them they're doing great. And invite them into a deeper conversation about faith and life.

I realize the gym analogy breaks down because I don't think the Christian faith is an individual pursuit like fitness can be (and clearly, I would be in better shape if I went to the gym three times a week and had a personal trainer). But if you stand there with a scowl on your face every Sunday, angry about empty seats, why would anyone want to sit in one? Showing empathy and compassion is a much superior strategy. It's also a much more Christian strategy.

Separate the mission from the method.

Somewhere along the way a lot of us end up confusing the mission and the method. Your mission is to lead people into a relationship with Jesus, not to get people to show up for an hour in a box every Sunday. Please hear me—I value our time together on Sundays as a church. And I think it's presently one of our very best vehicles through which to advance the mission of the church. But our mission is

not to fill seats on a Sunday. It's to lead people to Jesus.

You should be obsessed with your mission, not with filling seats. But truthfully, some of us are more in love with the method than the mission. If that's you, repent. I have. I am.

That shift will create a whole new mind-set in your team. As Will Mancini has said, this attitude shift will help you run offense instead of defense on the issue of declining church attendance.¹² You'll start to think of fresh ways to help people on their journey toward Jesus.

And—don't miss this—if you really help people move into an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ, they might show up more regularly in your church on Sunday. Ironic, isn't it?

Celebrate wins.

It's strange that when children take their first steps, we applaud wildly, but when Christians take their first steps, we often look down on them or even dismiss them as immature. So new Christians don't read their Bible every day or attend every week or give the way you want. I get that. But many long-time Christians don't either.

Here's a deeper question: Rather than judging infrequent or new attenders, why not love them? Why not celebrate every time they take a step? Send a handwritten thank-you note to each first-time attender. Welcome them when they come back. Throw a party when they show up again three months later. Celebrate like crazy when someone gives their first five-dollar gift. Jump for joy when someone decides to serve, or high-five them when they decide to get in a group.

Okay, I'm exaggerating a bit. The point isn't to get weird. The point is to celebrate. As Andy Stanley says, what you celebrate gets repeated. Celebration is as much about attitude as it is about anything. And being someone who loves to work and loves to think, I don't naturally celebrate as well as others might. So who provides a good role model in terms of celebration?

Probably the best celebrator I know is Bob Goff. I don't think I've ever met anyone with a bigger heart or who takes more delight in things others might ignore or despise. If you're really trying to figure out what Christian celebration looks like today, Bob's one of the best at it. Read his book. Stalk him (okay, don't stalk him, but do follow him).¹³ Let some of his kingdom-of-God joy rub off on you. If the church approached ministry the way people like Bob approach life, the church would be a far more attractive and beautifully contagious group of people.

Elevate personal relationships.

While online relationships are real relationships, nothing is as powerful or meaningful as face-to-face connection. Facilitating a deep relationship is easier and more effective in person. Churches that value personal relationships (even for thousands of people through groups) will always attract people who value personal connection (which is, I think, almost all of us). A growing church that organizes everything around groups will always be more effective than a church that doesn't.

Love people.

Can you fully love people without being fully present? Do human relationships go to their deepest level in person? I think so. At least one in twenty couples who are married today began their relationship online.¹⁴ But even those couples who meet online don't stay online—they get married. Love can be expressed online, but its fulfillment happens deepest through personal contact. Don't underestimate the power in something as simple as love or grace. People crave it. The church in all of its forms is connected to the greatest source of love there is.

Create a culture of serving.

One of the problems with regular participation in online church is that it fosters a consumption mentality. You become the served, not the one who is serving.

Serving in church on a Sunday or in the community during the week is a chance to stretch and grow our faith. It reminds us that our faith is not about what we get, but really about what we give. When you get up early to set up portable church, lead a second-grade small group, greet people with a smile, work on the production team, or serve meals to the homeless, somehow you find a place in service of a goal greater than yourself. Make serving guests and others outside your community part of your culture.

Prioritize kids and teens.

Parents can catch a podcast or watch online, but kids really miss out when parents miss. To be with their friends who are running in the same direction and to have another voice (a small group leader) who knows their name, favorite food, and hopes and dreams saying the same thing a loving parent would say, is so far irreproducible in the online world. I believe that when the parents miss church, the kids are the biggest losers. The more you prioritize families, the more families will prioritize Sundays.

Create an irresistible experience.

The problem with many churches is that they're resistible. Our experiences aren't compelling enough to draw people back. Some of that is clearly related to us not loving people deeply enough or connecting people well enough relationally. And those should be among the things church leaders value most.

But there's also another element. Many churches don't value excellence. While there's an animated debate about whether churches should be "excellent," ask the question this way: Are we content with being mediocre? Framed that way, it's easy to see that a mediocre experience is a resistible experience. If your church is boring, why would anyone want to come back? You've already lost the battle.

Create an awesome online presence.

Even if people aren't with you, you can still be with them. A growing number of churches are offering online campuses. Interestingly, some are also shutting them down because online viewership competes too much with physical attendance. Your team will have to decide where it lands on that issue, of course. But you need to ask yourself whether the Internet is going away anytime soon. I think we all might agree the answer is no. So the question then becomes, how do we leverage it?

If your church doesn't have the budget or other resources to launch a full online campus, there are still many ways to develop an effective online presence. An effective social media presence is within the reach of any church. You have to know where your congregation lives online, and that varies depending on your community and the demographics near you. But between Facebook, Twitter, podcasts, a custom church app, your church website, and a church or personal blog, you have the opportunity to reach people every day wherever they are online. And none of those options costs much money or requires highly trained staff. Volunteers would be more than willing to help, and many are already great at social media and other online platforms because they do it for fun or for work. Each of these platforms can be a way to shape people's discipleship and even provide meaningful first contact or ongoing connection with unchurched people. Finally, giving to church online has never

been easier. At Connexus, 70 percent or more of giving happens online. Other churches are seeing similar increases in online giving.

Church leaders today have an advantage that leaders simply didn't have a decade ago.

Social media and even e-mail are great ways to help people deepen their journey with Christ, not just push your latest program. What if you started viewing your social media channels and e-mail list as an opportunity to come alongside people and help them grow in their faith?

You have to be careful how you approach this, because if you're just trying to drive attendance, people will notice. But if you encourage them, inspire them, challenge them, and help them, they'll welcome your presence. If you run your social media and e-mail content through a *helpful* filter, people will be thrilled to hear from you. And it will deepen the bond you have with infrequent attenders. They'll come to see you as a friend, not just one more person trying to sell them something.

Be the favorite person in their inbox and their favorite thing to see on their news feed. Never underestimate what being helpful does for everyone involved.

Offer offline surprises.

If your Sunday experience is completely accessible online, mix things up a little at your physical location. Do something unique or fun in the parking lot, foyer, or service that you don't broadcast online. Create some memorable or poignant moments. Set up a photo booth in the foyer and let families get their picture taken for free when you're speaking on family. Celebrate a holiday together with a twist. For example, we gave butter tarts—a unique and amazing Canadian dessert—to every attender on Canada Day. They just happened to be made by the baker who was voted as making the best butter tarts in the country. We also make certain things, like branded coffee mugs and T-shirts (great gifts for attenders to hand to unchurched friends), available only on campus, not online. It creates a scarcity and rarity that makes people want to be there.

Start measuring outputs.

Will Mancini argues that church leaders are programmed to measure inputs, not outputs.¹⁵ I agree. Typically, we measure how many people showed up, what they gave, who they brought, and even online traffic. But rarely do we measure outputs.

While measuring outputs will take some time to develop, it begins with a paradigm shift. What if the church became as much a sending organization as a receiving organization?

And along with that, what if you developed ways to gauge spiritual growth and the effectiveness of your witness to the community? Metrics could include how much time people spend with God personally each day reading Scripture and praying. The current statistics reveal a surprisingly low amount of personal Scripture reading and prayer among Christians. According to a recent study, 57 percent of Americans read their Bible four times a year or less. Only 26 percent read it more than four times a week.¹⁶ What if you helped the people around your church change that?

And what if you got innovative and started thinking through whether people are better off five years after joining your church than they were before? Or whether they feel closer to Christ? Or whether they have a handful of truly deep friendships as a result of being associated with your church—the kind of friendship that allows 2 a.m. phone calls? Or what if you began to track whether people are impacting their workplaces and neighborhoods with the love and hope of Christ?

In other words, what if you helped your attenders *be* the church, not just *go* to church? What if you

measured the impact of the sending as well as you measured the numbers associated with the gathering? Leaders get passionate about what they measure. So measure carefully.

Your Relevance Is at Stake

When things are changing this rapidly in the culture, it's critical that church leaders develop approaches that respond just as quickly. Any gap that emerges between the outdated methods of church leaders and the changing pace of culture produces one thing: irrelevance.

Rather than seeing this as an obstacle that's difficult to surmount, try to see this as an opportunity. The first-century church formed and spread rapidly in an environment that was more hostile to Christianity than the one the early twenty-first century offers.

Conversation #2

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk About It

1. Of the eleven reasons given for even committed church attenders attending less often, which are you seeing in your community and church?
2. To what extent has the trend of people attending church less often impacted your ministry over the last decade?
3. The characteristics of today's unchurched people are often indicative of a post-Christian generation. To what extent do they describe the people who live in your community?
4. What word best describes your church's attitude toward infrequent church attenders? Be honest.
5. Would you describe your church as being truly loving toward unchurched people? Why or why not?
6. Is your attitude toward infrequent attenders and unchurched people helping or hindering your mission?

Get Practical

Below are the eleven strategies we have discussed in this chapter to help you engage infrequent church attenders and the unchurched. As a team, make notes on each approach, using these questions as a guide:

Which holds promise for you?

Which doesn't?

Which are you already doing?

Which seems completely foreign to you or too much of a stretch?

Which approaches would be easy for your church to adopt?

Which would be a challenge?

Which could you implement right away?

Which would take time?

1. Show empathy.

2. Separate the mission from the method.
3. Celebrate wins.
4. Elevate personal relationships.
5. Love people.
6. Create a culture of serving.
7. Prioritize kids and teens.
8. Create an irresistible experience.
9. Create an awesome online presence.
10. Offer offline surprises.
11. Start measuring outputs.

Make It Happen

Identify your single biggest obstacle to coming alongside infrequent church attenders and unchurched people. Once you've identified it, create a six-month plan to remove it.

In addition, identify two to five other key obstacles in your path. Now design a one- to two-year plan to address each of those obstacles.

Make sure you assign responsibilities and accountability and meet periodically to evaluate progress.