

Church Inside Out

by

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SECTION
I

**THE
CHURCH
INSIDE**



CHURCH INSIDE OUT

*Here is the church.
Here is the steeple.
Open the doors,
And see all the people.*

That rhyme was a favorite finger activity many years ago when I was in Sunday School. We learned to make churches by putting our hands together, interlocking our fingers, and holding up our index fingers to form steeples. Then we'd separate our thumbs to "open the doors" and wiggle the other fingers to represent the people inside.

It was later in life that I learned that this nursery game, while earning high points for cuteness, didn't score well in theology. A building and a steeple don't make a church; the church is the people inside. You don't go to church; you *are* the church.

There was another problem with my finger theology, though I wouldn't spot it for years. It's a problem that many churches are facing today: With all the people inside, there was no way the world would ever see the church. They see the building but don't see the church inside.

We'd like to think that merely by opening the doors we can get people to come join us, but it really doesn't work that way. Despite what you may have heard in the movie *Field of Dreams*, just building it doesn't get them to come.

If all of the insiders stay in, most of the outsiders will stay out. The only way to get the outsiders into the church is to get the insiders to go out. We must learn to be the church inside out.

It isn't your grandfather's culture...

There's a growing hostility to Christianity in our country today. Research done across the U.S. shows a desire by many to "get

past” religion in general and Christianity in particular. Though religion may have been useful in the past, many are convinced it really has no place in our modern world.

Fewer people believe in God. Fewer people accept the Bible as God’s Word.

And fewer people still are interested in being part of a church. Let’s look at some numbers:

- Pew Research found, in a recent survey,¹ that the number of people in the U.S who see themselves as “Unaffiliated” when it comes to religion rose between 2007 and 2014 from 16.1 percent to 22.8 percent.
- A Gallup survey² found in 2014 that 21 percent of people in this country consider the Bible to be purely a man-made document, up from 13 percent in 1976.
- Research done in the U.S. by Harris Interactive³ found that the number of people who believe in God had declined from 82 percent in 2009 to 74 percent in 2013.

Christianity no longer dominates our culture in the U.S. Laws that favored a Christian worldview are being struck down, one after another. Laws that outlawed behaviors condemned by Christianity are also falling by the wayside.

Pressure is coming from all sides for the church to change, to adapt its doctrine and practice to the shifting views of popular culture.

Half a century ago, when I was a boy, things were different, especially in Texas.

- We had blue laws that forbade the selling of non-essential items on Sunday.
- Everyone wanted to be seen as a churchgoer, whether out of conviction or a desire to do business within the Christian community.

- There were no youth sports events on Sunday. In fact, when I was young, there were no youth sports events on Wednesday evening, either. We might have practice on Wednesday, but we always finished in time to make it to mid-week services.
- Bible was taught at our local high school. We had prayers at ballgames and school assemblies.
- Christianity was at the center of culture.

Now, Christianity is on the edge. It's still acceptable to be Christian, but just barely. It isn't acceptable, however, to let Christianity dictate who you are or what you do. You're expected to be American first. Or liberal. Or conservative. Or libertarian. Not Christian.

When it comes time for making choices about how to live and how to behave, society no longer respects choices based on religious values...unless they line up with cultural norms, such as tolerance, personal freedom, personal rights, respect for others' views, freedom to choose. A whole laundry list of cultural values...all of these are valid reasons for making choices in our culture today.

You can be motivated by women's rights, animal rights, gay rights, human rights, right-wing rights, and left-wing rights. You can justify your actions by appealing to capitalism, socialism, humanism, secularism, or any of dozens of -isms.

But there's one motivation that society won't stand for: "Because the Bible says so" is no longer acceptable.

...but it is your grandfather's church

It may not be your grandfather's culture, but it's still your grandfather's church. Quite literally.

Chances are, when you look around the auditorium of your local congregation, you see a lot of gray heads. The median age of church members is on the rise; younger generations feel less of a pull to be a part of a local church.

They also feel little to no loyalty to any specific church group, denominational or non-denominational.

Let's look again at some recent findings:

- Though the Harris poll⁴ cited above reported 74 percent of the population believes in God, that number drops to 64 percent when talking about people age 18-36.
- A Barna study⁵ of Millennials (people born after 1982) found that 27 percent of non-Christians considered the Bible to be a dangerous book used in the oppression of others. More than that, they consider those that read the Bible to be old-fashioned (17%) and unlikely to have anything in common with them (21%).
- The aforementioned Pew Research study⁶ found that Millennials considered themselves "Unaffiliated" at a higher rate (36%). Fewer than six in ten identified themselves as being part of any one Christian group.

Church members in general feel less pressure to attend every service. Job pressures are growing, as more and more businesses remain open on Sunday. The number of youth sports activities that take place on Sunday is up dramatically, as are the number of such events that involve travel to other cities.

Even if the average member only misses ten Sundays per year (due to work, family visits, vacations, youth sports, or other things), that is an immediate attendance drop of roughly 20 percent. For most churches, that's a significant number.

Like all generalizations, there are exceptions. Some churches are filled to the brim with young adults. In other churches, generation after generation remains faithful, the young people remain engaged during their college years, and young families and single adults clamor for their chance to be an active part of church life.

But those congregations are few and far between.

Modernism and postmodernism

So how did we get here? There have always been gaps in understanding between generations, but today's situation seems especially severe.

We have to look back a bit. When Christianity began, it certainly wasn't at the center of culture. From the time of Nero up to the Edict of Toleration in 313 A.D., the church suffered ten periods of intense persecution.

The tide changed completely in 375 A.D. when Christianity was named the official religion of the Roman Empire. With Church and State united, what emerged was known as Christendom.

During the Middle Ages, from the 5th century until the 15th century, it could basically be assumed that all Western Europeans were Christian; if not by faith, they were "believers" by virtue of their citizenship. To be a loyal subject of the king was to be a faithful member of the king's religion. And the kings of Europe professed Christianity.

The church was at the heart of culture. Cathedrals were at the center of every European city, and it was expected that no building would be taller than the spires above the cathedral. Art and music were created around religious themes. Science was governed by religion; if science did not agree with Scripture, then the science was faulty.

With the coming of the Renaissance in the 15th century, things began to change. There was a renewed emphasis on the individual spirit. The church and secularism marked two separate paths for society, and the tension between the two grew as time passed. This was the beginning of modernism.

Modernism took religion's authority and gave it to logical analysis. During the Enlightenment, faith in God was replaced with faith in science and reason. The future of mankind was a society ordered around rationalism. Progress and technology would lead this world to a golden age.

This optimism was shattered in Europe by the horrors of war, particularly the World Wars. Progress was not leading mankind to peace; the same advances that worked for the advancement of society could also be used for the ravages of war. Rather than widespread prosperity and wellbeing, Europe found destruction and famine. This led to a disillusionment with the promises of the past, both in terms of modernism and religion. Authority was questioned, the individual empowered, and Europe became postmodern...and post-Christian.

This wasn't the story in the U.S, however. This country was largely untouched by the World Wars and actually profited from them economically. Over time, however, growing social problems, environmental issues, and a disenchantment with established authority led to a rejection of modernism and its principles.

Modernism lasted longer in the States, but postmodernism has gradually carried the day.

Modernity arose out of a questioning of traditional sources of knowledge. Postmodernity went further, questioning man's ability to arrive at absolute knowledge. Where one questioned how we come to know what we know, the other questioned if anything could really be known.

Much more could be said, but what you need to know is this: Where reason and logic are the main ways to reach the hearts and minds of modernists, this is no longer true for younger generations.

To reach a modernist, you aim for the head. To reach a post-modernist, you aim for the heart.

Uncommon sense

As we look at ways to help our congregations minister to their communities, you need to know that there are no insider secrets. A dying church won't be resuscitated by reading a book, attending a seminar, or watching a video.

I think that's one of the key elements of outreach we so often

miss. It isn't about a magic formula. It isn't about the special filmstrips or convincing books we might choose to give people. It isn't about knowing the chain of verses in precise order. It isn't about having an answer to every conceivable question.

When we talk about reaching out to others, be they teens or octogenarians, most of what we need to think about can be boiled down to what Jesus called the greatest commands:

Jesus replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37–39).

We have to love God and love our neighbors. We have to show our neighbors that God loves them and help our neighbors come to love God.

Much of what I'll talk about in this book is common sense. But, as you know, common sense doesn't seem to be all that common; hopefully you will learn things that will help your church better serve your neighbors (and better serve God!).

You'll need to use some common sense in assessing your church's situation, as well. There are churches situated in communities that are in decline. There are small towns all over America that will only become smaller as the years go by. Unless someone strikes oil in the vicinity or finds gold deposits in the hills nearby, these towns will not be revived.

If you are in a church in a town like that, know that your calling is to faithfully serve this community in its twilight years. It's likely that your church will decline along with the town; you'll have to reconcile yourself to that fact. God needs faithful Christians ministering in such situations just as He does in the great urban centers. And even if the long-term prognosis is decline, much can be done to create a healthier present.

Some churches will be in a situation where they will inevitably become smaller; others will find themselves surrounded by

growth opportunities. We must honestly evaluate the context in which we find ourselves.

Vital signs and annual physicals

Statistics describe, they don't prescribe. That is, surveys and numbers don't tell us what we should be or even what we will be; they only tell us what we are.

Before going in for my physical each year, I have bloodwork done. After making the sacrifice of fasting for 12 hours, I hold out my arm and let them stick me with a needle (which is a big sacrifice for me; I hate needles!). They take my blood and run all the tests they deem necessary.

On the day of my physical, I go in and step on the scale, hearing the nurse read off a number that has to be an exaggeration. Then she takes my blood pressure, and I wait for the doctor.

When he comes in, we talk about numbers. My weight. My blood pressure. My cholesterol. My glucose level. On and on. Numbers, numbers, numbers.

And he tells me what those numbers could mean. We talk about symptoms and illnesses. We talk about possibilities, most of them undesirable. Through all this, my doctor seems to be a somewhat negative person; he's always looking for what's wrong.

Then he'll offer some suggestions. Lose weight. Exercise. Eat this; don't eat that. Take this medicine; don't bother with this other one.

There are a few things to remember about these physicals:

- The numbers are a way of gauging my current health and a way of predicting future outcomes.
- Even as my doctor describes negative things, he's trying to help me avoid as many of them as possible.
- My physical is an attempt to help me understand my current situation and set a course for the best possible future.

This book is going to do a bit of the same. In the early part of

the book, we will look at common “illnesses” in churches, things that happen that keep them from being as healthy as they could be. If that first part seems a bit negative, please remember your doctor; just as he is going to point out problem areas in your health to help you improve them, so I want to shine light on negative aspects of our churches so that we can make them better.

I’d urge you to treat this book a bit like you would an annual physical. Don’t expect to have all the symptoms or all the illnesses. Do expect to find some things that could be improved in your congregation’s dealings with your community.

Don’t be surprised if you disagree with a recommendation or two; it never hurts to get a second opinion!

And please don’t rationalize the way I often do when I go to the doctor:

“My weight is up because they made me wear my shoes.”

“My blood pressure reading wasn’t right because they rushed me.”

“My cholesterol was only high because I had a hamburger the night before.”

Take an honest look at what you’re doing and what could be done better.

In the end, it isn’t about defending or condemning your local congregation. It’s about finding ways to love God and love your neighbor.

Open the doors

There’s a second verse to the nursery rhyme with which I began this chapter:

*Close the doors,
And hear the people pray.
Open the doors,
And they all walk away.*

It’s my prayer that we can open the doors of the church and

get our members to walk away—not to abandon the church, but to walk into our communities with mission and purpose.

We need to be sure that the world sees us not as a group that hides behind closed doors, but as a group that goes out from the building: out to love, out to serve, out to share the Good News.

I also pray that we can open the doors to let the outsiders in. Those around us need to see our churches as welcoming places where they can be part of a loving community.

The only way to get the outsiders into the church is to get the insiders to go out. We have to learn to be the church inside out.

Suggested Reading

They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations

by Dan Kimball

(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007)

Kimball analyzes negative views of the church that are often expressed by younger generations. He not only discusses the relevance of these objections, but also offers suggestions as to how the church can address these concerns.

Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity—and Why It Matters.

by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007)

Kinnaman and Lyons use research by the Barna Group to document religious attitudes of young Americans, particularly those who are negative toward Christianity. They use this data to propose ways that Christians can better reach these younger generations.

CHAPTER 1 For Small Group Study

If you choose to conduct this study through small groups or to follow the lecture/sermon approach with a small group study, you can use the outline suggested below. Each small group study draws from information presented in the chapter as well as from materials in the corresponding chapter in the Student Workbook. The outline below is designed for a one-hour discussion but may be adapted to fit the particular needs of your group.

Welcome/introductions (5 min.) If this is the first time for your group to be together, you may need additional time to meet one another and discuss the format of this and future meetings.

Praise and prayer (10 min.) Decide as a group if you want to sing, whether or not to take prayer requests, etc.

Discussion (35 min.)

1. Discuss the group's feelings about beginning this study: *excitement about new possibilities, concerns about possible changes, interest in learning more...*
2. Get the group's reactions to this statement:

*The only way to get the outsiders **into** the church
is to get the insiders to go **out**.*

Ask them to describe why they feel your church is or isn't doing a good job of going out into the community. Talk about areas where the congregation is doing well and areas where improvement could be made. (Remember that when we say "your church," we include you personally as a member of that church.)

3. Look at the chart of times of cultural/religious change in the Bible. Can you think of other examples? If you have time,

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you can talk about the context of the verses quoted above, both the immediate context and the historical context.

4. Talk about changes you see worldwide, nationwide, and within your community. How does your group feel about the changes they see?
5. What changes in your community could the church do a better job of addressing?
6. Compare your ranking of the challenges facing the church. What other challenges would your group add?
7. Discuss the answers you marked on the vital signs chart. Does the group generally see the same things going on in your church? If not, do you think that's good or bad?

Conclude with a time of prayer for your congregation and the community you serve (10 min.)