Quitting Church

WHY THE FAITHFUL ARE FLEEING AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

JULIA DUIN

BakerBooks
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Duin, Julia.
Quitting church : why the faithful are fleeing and what to do about it / Julia Duin.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-8010-6823-2 (cloth)
1. Church attendance. 2. Church membership. I. Title.
BV652.5.D85 2008
277.3'083—dc22 2008020161

Scripture is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

Materials from several chapters appeared previously in online essays posted at www.BreakPoint.org, copyright Prison Fellowship, 2007. Used with permission.

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is comprised of 30% post-consumer waste.

green press INITIATIVE

CONTENTS

1

THE FLOOD OUTWARD

Why So Many Good People Are Leaving

"You're not going to church?" I asked him.

It was his birthday, so we had met for dinner at the Olive Garden, one of our favorite Italian restaurants. He shook his head. "Matt," I will call him, was legally blind and unable to drive. That and a few other handicaps had not prevented him from having a decent-paying job with the U.S. government, from amassing a world-class library in his home, and from being the go-to guy with answers to all my questions about Reformed theology.

But here he was, disconsolate. A reporter by trade, I dragged his story out of him.

"I don't mind taking the metro to church, but you know me," he said, "I'm pretty Reformed, and the kind of church I like is always at least two miles from the nearest stop."

I named a church in Alexandria, a posh suburb with its own historic district. He'd been going there the last time we talked.

"Oh, they promised they'd find me a family that could pick me up," he said. "And they did, for a while. Then they started forgetting I was there. It was like Russian roulette. I would get dressed and wait for them, but I never knew which Sunday they'd actually show up at my front door."

By the time he'd get this family on their cell phone, they'd already be in the church parking lot and in no mood to double back and get him. When he brought this up to the leaders at his church, they told him he was on his own. Finally he just quit going for more than a year. No one from his church ever called to ask where he was. He contacted some other churches, but none would offer him any help in getting to their services.

I was stunned. If anyone was in love with God, it was Matt. He was single and male, rare in church these days. But no one wanted him. In fact no one wanted a bunch of my friends. There was Gwen in Salem, Oregon, whose pastor would never say more than a few words to her. Struggling to bring up three kids alone, she could have used his moral support. "But pastors don't pal around with single moms," she told me. "Too many needs and we're not big enough givers." She finally dropped out of her Pentecostal congregation.

Then there were Paul and Ed, two journalist friends in Richmond, Virginia, and Casper, Wyoming. Both brilliant evangelical men, they told me they loved the Lord but couldn't live with the paucity of spiritual maturity in every congregation they visited. Both were now church dropouts.

And there was Maeve, a married friend whose husband had talked back to the elders at their former congregation, a large Bible church also in northern Virginia. The elders

kicked them both out. This couple found some refuge in a smaller, evangelical congregation, but, "I go only out of obedience," she told me over lunch one day.

She was referring to the admonition in Hebrews 10:25 against "forsaking the assembling of ourselves together," a verse commonly used to exhort one's friends not to skip out on other Christians and, by extension, the Lord. The verse is framed with commands to "consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works" and that Christians should be "exhorting one another."

Those commands weren't put to use with people like her.

"The church is not like Christ," she added sadly.

Slipping Out

Those are just my personal friends. As for people I interview in my day-to-day job as a religion reporter, I was discovering that many, many evangelical Christians are slipping out or barely hanging on to their churches. It's no secret that the percentage of Americans in church on any given Sunday is dropping fast. Religious attendance fell from 41 percent in 1971 to 31 percent in 2002, according to a survey sponsored by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. For years, Gallup polls have shown American church attendance hovering at 43 percent of the population, which would mean 129 million out of an estimated 300 million Americans at the end of 2006. However, two 2005 studies, one by sociologists C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler and the other by Dave Olson, a researcher for the Evangelical Covenant Church, show that a more accurate attendance percentage is in the 18th to 20th percentile, half of what Gallup shows.

A significantly smaller number of Americans "are participating in the most basic Christian practices: the weekly gathering for worship, teaching, prayer and fellowship," Olson said in the April 2006 issue of *Christianity Today*.

Hadaway and Marler faulted the complexities of American life—exhaustion, traffic, two working parents, even children's soccer games increasingly getting scheduled on Sundays—as the main reason people give themselves much more leniency in skipping church. They have a point, but I remember thirty years ago when America was in the middle of the Jesus Movement. Back then no one dared miss all the amazing things going on during a Sunday morning service.

How things have changed!

The three fastest-growing church groups, according to the *2007 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*, were Assemblies of God, Mormons, and Catholics. The Southern Baptists, long a growing denomination, saw its baptisms *drop* at the midpoint of the decade. A lot of growth in the Catholic Church was due to immigrants. One-third of immigrants switch to Protestant churches within a generation, according to Edwin Hernandez, a research fellow for the Center for the Study of Latino Religion at the University of Notre Dame. However, not all those departing Catholics are ending up in Protestant churches. Because evangelicals were for a long time the political flavor of the month due to a two-term Bush presidency, most secular pundits paint church members as a large, powerful monolith that moves in time to commands from Focus on the Family and can mobilize millions of voters to act through the words of a few spokesmen. This is hugely inaccurate. It's true that evangelicals can work powerfully in concert, but their numbers are not growing appreciably. Much church growth is due to transfers from one church to another.

None of this is to say spiritually interested people are not out there. The packed churches nationwide after September 11 show they are. We all know how the terrorist attacks provoked a growth spurt in church attendance, only to have it die down within a month after the seekers melted away, unimpressed.

Because the U.S. population is expanding, evangelical pollster George Barna estimates the number of unchurched Americans is growing by about one million each year. The fraction of Americans with no religious preference doubled during the 1990s from 8 to 14 percent, according to a 2001 City University of New York "American Religious Identification Survey." However, of that 14 percent, less than half (40 percent) were atheists; the other 60 percent were merely "religious" or "spiritual." In other words, plenty of people in this country are interested in spiritual matters. They are simply not going to church to feed this interest.

Why? I have sensed for several years something is not right with church life, especially with evangelical church life. It's been reported many times that most Americans have fled mainline Protestant churches in the past half century, cutting denominations such as the Episcopal Church and Presbyterian Church USA by half. But in the past decade, it's the evangelical churches that are losing ground.

These are not the large megachurches on which all the media are fixated. Ten percent of America's 331,000 congregations have more than 350 members, but more than half of those attending religious services go to those 33,000 or so churches, according to the University of Arizona's 1998 National Congregations Study. Or, as the study said, although most churches are small, most people are in large churches. For instance, 28 percent of all churchgoers are Roman Catholic, but only 6 percent of all congregations are

Catholic. Catholic congregations have always been huge, partly due to the shortage of priests. Their large, often impersonal nature—one priest to every 3,640 Catholics—makes it easy for smaller Protestant congregations to pick them off.

Yet not all Protestant churches are doing well. Seventy-one percent of all congregations, said the Arizona study, have fewer than one hundred participating adults. *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations*, published in 2002 by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, put it this way: America is like a hypothetical town of one thousand, divided among ten congregations. Eight of the ten would be small and more than half of the people would worship in two large churches, one of them being Roman Catholic.

It's an odd pattern. Americans like small groups but prefer big churches. And in recent years, they've found more and more churches, big and small, that aren't relevant to their lives. I was born again in the Pacific Northwest during the Jesus Movement, so I was used to burgeoning churches in Seattle during my teens. When my parents moved to the Washington, D.C., area, I spent my college summers there. At the time, the metro Washington area was bursting with lively evangelical, charismatic, even messianic Jewish congregations. Christian radio stations and Jesus music festivals were hot. The Catholic charismatic prayer meetings all over the DC area were powerful and evangelistic. Every Tuesday night, some two thousand college-aged people packed into Christ Church on Massachusetts Avenue for a powerful evangelical Protestant service called TAG (for "Take and Give"), filled with powerful preaching by men not much older than I. During the service, amazing prophecies were given. Converts poured out of that place by the hundreds.

The 1980s

Returning to Portland for my first newspaper job, I began to notice how the best congregations suffered bizarre splits, how often pastors got trapped into horrendous sexual situations, and how much of the fallout landed on the members. One of my reporting specialties was Christian communities, having lived in a radical one in downtown Portland—we pooled salaries even—during the community heyday in the 1970s. Yet by 1990 nearly every Christian community in the country had dissolved or dramatically shrunk in numbers.

Lots of folks ended up in regular churches, their once radical Christian lives domesticated and tranquilized. By the late 1980s, I was a religion reporter for the *Houston Chronicle*, spending much of my time covering the televangelist scandals that followed one after another in 1987 and 1988. Although Pat Robertson's run for the presidency in 1988 bespoke a new evangelical political power, the spiritual power so evident in churches I attended in the 1970s had evaporated. Church growth techniques were substituted. Everyone was into inner healing.

Meanwhile, books like Phil Yancey's 1988 book *Disappointment with God* and Ron Enroth's 1992 *Churches That Abuse* (which he followed up with a sequel in 1994) were coming out, hinting at a darker reality undergirding American "churchdom."

In 1990 I began writing a history of Houston's Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, for years a bright light in the worldwide charismatic renewal. Its pastor, Graham Pulkingham, was a major founder of the movement, and the flood of music that poured out of that church still echoes in many congregations today. As I traveled the country interviewing former members, I was amazed to find, over and over, people who had dropped out of church. The most common

theme was the banality of the local church, especially after having experienced so much supernatural power in Houston. Redeemer, people told me, ruined you for life at any other church. There they had experienced fabulous worship, great preaching, spiritual gifts, and sacrificial giving so that newcomers were converted almost as soon as they walked into the place. Once they left Houston, it was hard to find anything close.

These people were experienced believers. Many had joined other churches, then slowly dropped out, when either a pastor saw them as a threat or the spiritual gruel offered Sunday after Sunday just became unpalatable. At the time, I wrote off a lot of these people as just not trying hard enough to find a good church. After all, when I had left Houston to attend seminary near Pittsburgh, I had found several good churches.

However, my next move, to northwestern New Mexico in 1994, helped me to understand their frustration. The local Episcopal Church was twenty years behind the vibrant churches I was used to. I taught Sunday school there but was unable to make friends. Finally I fled to an Assemblies of God congregation and chalked up my church-hunting difficulties to the isolated corner of the state I lived in.

But my next move, to Virginia, turned up worse problems in finding a church. The Washington region, a spiritual powerhouse in the 1970s, had shifted dramatically twenty-five years later. Once spiritually powerful churches had become "seeker-friendly" congregations, and their main aim seemed to be to make the service as short as possible. Everything seemed packaged. TAG had morphed into a megachurch that had dropped its freewheeling charismatic distinctives for a much more staid service that emphasized writings by Charles Spurgeon and other Reformed theologians. The

bookstore was stocked only with books personally approved by the pastor.

The once vibrant Catholic charismatic prayer meetings in the area had vanished, except for one very quiet group meeting in a Maryland suburb. There were a number of large Protestant congregations, but most revolved around the personality of their pastor. A 1994 Canadian revival known as the "Toronto blessing" livened up some church services for a few years, but by 1997 the biggest spiritual event going was the Promise Keepers meeting on the Mall. And within two years of that, the national men's group was scraping for funds and downsizing. And then a promising revival in Pensacola, Florida, degenerated into splits among its leaders. Dryness was everywhere.

No Watering Hole

I was having breakfast in a trendy restaurant in the northern Virginia suburb of Arlington when I broached the subject with two friends. They too knew of many people who were desperate to find spiritual food and drink from their churches. "But there's very little out there of substance," one friend said. "All these thirsty people and no watering hole." What a poignant commentary on the current landscape of American Christianity!

And the problem wasn't just local. Many of my favorite church haunts from Portland in the 1970s were on the ropes. I heard from friends living near Los Angeles about how all the congregations they encountered were just reinventing the wheel. One Sunday during a business trip to Ft. Lauderdale, I dropped by what is supposedly the largest church in the county. I found a windowless sanctuary where all the activity was centered on the stage, while the audience—we

were not truly a congregation, it seemed—sat passively for two hours. The only time the people there looked alive was after the service at the church's fabulous organic cafeteria.

A lot of evangelical leaders do not see a problem. In the late 1990s a group of journalists had a conference phone call with several such Christian leaders. One was the late Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade. He insisted America was on the threshold of national revival because he saw the growth of a vibrant prayer movement on his speaking tours. Several of us challenged him, saying we remembered all too well how much livelier American religion was in the seventies. Where was his proof that things were better now? He could not say.

In early 2006 I emailed the local head of a national evangelistic campus Christian ministry, asking if he saw much going on spiritually in his circles. "I just don't see signs of revival at all," he said. "In fact just the opposite. I see a lot of shallow evangelicals who are tossed to and fro by the culture." Things were better, we both agreed, in the days when we were in college. "The current situation speaks loudly about how evangelical campus groups understand their priorities for being on campus these days," he told me. "It's fellowship, not evangelism, that is most groups' reason for existence, which is sad."

If campuses, which are usually the cutting edge of trends, are showing major slippage, I wonder where else the exodus is showing up. Are these examples like the canary in the mine, showing that spiritual oxygen is running out?

The problem seems to be the church itself. Survey after survey says many Americans continue their private religious practices, such as reading the Bible, praying to God, and even sharing their faith in Jesus Christ. But they have given up on the institution. I kept encountering people who

had been converted back in the Jesus Movement days of the 1970s. Many said they were too disheartened to attend church now, knowing how vibrant it used to be and how dead it seems now.

Then I found an essay, posted on a Listserv by revival historian Andrew Strom, about a similar "out of church" phenomenon in New Zealand. The people opting out of church had been leaders, the most committed, but as the years wore on, they simply could not stand to sit and "watch the same old game being played anymore," he said. "The lack of God is what gets to them, even in our most 'Spirit-filled' churches."

He continued, "New fads and programs come and go, but mediocrity and lack of God just seem to go on forever. And so quietly, sometimes without anyone even noticing, they slowly slip out the doors, never to return."

So it's not just us Americans, I thought. After he posted this essay, he got reams of emails, he said, "which confirmed to me that this issue is so much larger than many of us have realized. I don't think a lot of Christian leaders have any clue how many believers are simply opting out of organized religion today."

A short time later, in quick succession, I noticed articles in *Charisma* and *Christianity Today* about Christians opting out of church. It was amazing to read some of the letters to the editor in these magazines. "Do you want to know why Christians are leaving the 'bricks and mortar church'?" one person asked in *Charisma*'s April 2005 letters-to-the-editor section. "Could it be that the church is dysfunctional and does not know its true role in the lives of believers?" A letter to the editor in the March 2006 *Christianity Today* said today's church dropout is not interested in a "weakened local church. Instead we are seeking a departure from a

Christian subculture that has developed over the last twenty years, and a return to a faith that is authentic, relevant, and applicable.

"In our minds, the local church has become its own culture—from megachurches with creative marketing campaigns to Christian music, Christian books, Christian clothing, and even Christian weight-loss programs. These things, in and of themselves, are well and good—but they are no substitute for a fleshed-out faith."

Others talked about legalism, turf battles, and worship that had become entertainment. None of these writers wanted to quit church; they felt pushed out or that leaving was taking the high road. "Many of us dropouts tried to work behind the scenes to keep unity," one wrote to *Charisma*. "But if we spoke out, we were 'in rebellion.' Many of us chose to leave rather than start wars."

Furthermore, no army can fight if huge numbers of its members have gone AWOL. Hadaway and Marler estimated as much as 78 million Protestants belong to this camp of no-shows. That sounds high to me, but still, why have many of the church's best soldiers laid down their arms in disgust?

Bailing Out

In the fall of 2005 a new book landed on my desk: *Why Men Hate Going to Church* by David Murrow. It showed a sleeping man draped over a pew. The book reported that men are not walking out of church, they're running out.

Then I had an interview with George Barna about his new book, *Revolution*, in which he mourns the multitudes running out the door. Not only have the men bailed out, he said, many of the women are following them.

In the first days of 2006, *Charisma* printed a message by evangelist Steve Hill (one of several men behind the mid-1990s revival at an Assembly of God church in Pensacola), who called much of what's happening in today's churches "eye candy."

And in the January issue of *Discipleship Journal*, one of the lead stories was "How to Survive Church: Hope for Disillusioned Churchgoers."

In March *Time* magazine announced "some evangelicals are abandoning megachurches for minichurches—based in their own living rooms." It was about the growth of house churches among disgruntled American evangelicals. We used to joke at my newspaper that by the time a news magazine got around to reporting a trend, it was always old news, especially when it concerned religion. So if *Time* had already tracked this trend, obviously the exodus was in full swing.

So it's official: evangelicals, for a variety of reasons, are heading out of church—not all of them and not everywhere, but the trend is undeniable. Sunday mornings at church have become too banal, boring, or painful. Large groups of Christians are opting out of church because they find it impossible to stay.

In 2002 Barna gave *Christianity Today* "nine challenges" for American Christians.

1. Worship is stale: the "same old same old."
2. Evangelicals are watering down their theological beliefs.
3. Evangelical congregations are still by and large split into all-white, all-black, or all-Hispanic groups. That shouldn't be.
4. Many Christians, especially younger ones, don't take the Bible seriously, especially on issues such as divorce and premarital sex.

5. Christianity in America has essentially no built-in cost.
6. Any expression of the supernatural has been excised from Sunday worship.
7. No one is ready for the fact that Gen Y Christians are going to radically reinvent the church.
8. U.S. churches tend to compete rather than cooperate.
9. There is a dearth of good leaders. Those who fill America's pulpits, he said, are teachers—good people all—but not leaders with a vision.

After reading that, I began to wonder if the evangelical monolith is simply the emperor before losing his clothes. The form is there, but the substance—the strength and the people—has long departed.

My research fleshed out Barna's data. Also I ran across something impossible to measure in a survey: 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, and if these people brought up their concerns in a Bible study, their doubts and anger toward God were frowned on by others in the group. They were like wounded soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to a country that barely knew they were at war. Such people needed sermons on unanswered prayer, but their pastors were giving PowerPoint presentations on attaining breakthroughs.

My research suggested that people are simply not being pastored. Often ministers are out of touch with what's

happening on the ground, as they are surrounded by a wall of secretaries and voice mail. Congregants have to wait up to a month for an appointment, if they can get in at all. Once-a-week home Bible study groups lack depth and theological know-how for help with the serious problems many of us face. Many churches refer people to professional counseling that costs at least seventy-five dollars an hour. Those lucky enough to have a health plan that pays for counseling usually find the only counselors on approved HMO lists have no concept of a Christian worldview.

I ran into demographic groups, such as men and singles, who have abandoned the church in large numbers because they are fed up with their needs never being addressed. Singles are the largest demographic among the unchurched. A third group, working moms, is about to join those two demographics. Many people are no longer content to waste part of their Sundays on an institution that gives them nothing.

Other concerns that alienate people are church scandals, irrelevancy, an inefficient leadership model, the quenching of supernatural spiritual gifts during Sunday worship, clergy who are too controlling of passive congregations, the impersonal nature of the typical service—and the list goes on.

This book is an attempt to get at the roots of these problems, understand why people are bailing out, and offer some ideas—my own and those of others—on what would bring them back. The hour is not too late. But if nothing is done, this exodus of desperation, this boycott, will continue.

Lastly, although this is a fascinating phenomenon from a sociological viewpoint, it is also intensely personal. I have two brothers who, like me, are born-again Christians. When I began researching this book, none of us

belonged to a church. Disheartened, we had all dropped out of congregations near Portland, Seattle, and northern Virginia. I was part of a large exodus from a church that lost half its members—about four hundred people—in just a few years.

I pulled out in 2001. I would be churchless for the next six years. That's not something I had planned. My desk has several books piled on it describing the sad state of the church, written by journalists who were once evangelical but who are no longer or who have abandoned their faith. Theirs was not a road I wanted to take.

Back in 1998 I was discussing my situation with some friends in Winthrop, just over the Cascade Mountains in the eastern part of Washington State. It was a sunny May afternoon, and we were walking through a meadow covered with purple lupine, larkspur, sunflowers, mustard, balsamroot, pink bitterroot—a zoo of flowers. I was describing my church as we looked out on the north Cascades.

"Oh, you'll leave," they said, "because they won't change. Either you change or you leave."

Not me, I said. I had always criticized those who had left church. But within three years, I was gone. For the first time in almost thirty years of attending evangelical churches, I was throwing in the towel. Like my friend Matt at the Olive Garden, I gave up. And I was surprised to find how little I missed going to church; it was a relief to avoid the bizarre treatment I had gotten from leaders there. I did stick with a Wednesday night home group, which fulfilled many of the functions of a church, for five years. Then that group dissolved by mutual consent in January 2006. A month later a Christian journalists fellowship I'd been part of fell apart unexpectedly. Other than a friend who was a weekly prayer partner, I was truly going it alone.

Eventually I did end up back in a church, but on the road to arriving there, I began asking questions and structuring people's responses in several categories as to why the faithful are fleeing. It's not hard to find the reason so many are heading out the door; the trick is how to stir back to life what remains.