

Book Review of *The Great Dechurching*

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The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will it Take to Bring Them Back? by Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan P. Burge. (Zondervan, 2023.)

Some months ago, I had lunch with “Stuart,” whom I hadn’t seen at church in over six months. “I don’t want you guys to think this has anything to do with the church,” he tried to reassure me. “You guys are fine, you’re great. This is about us. It’s just so hard with work and kids and school during the week, then every Saturday is taken up with dance and art class, and by Sunday we have this heaping pile of laundry and dishes to do so we can be ready to start everything over again on Monday morning.”

Sound familiar, anyone?

It was a handful of conversations like this that compelled me to pre-order a copy of *The Great Dechurching* by Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan Burge—a book I’d seen referenced in sources from the *New York Times* to *The Atlantic* to *The Christian Post*.

The book opens:

In the United States, we are currently experiencing the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country, as tens of millions of formerly regular Christian worshipers nationwide have decided they no longer desire to attend church at all.

According to Davis, Graham, and Burge, my parishioners might belong to the “casually dechurched” category: people whose weekly rhythms have changed due to the birth of children, Covid, work, a move, etc. They are distinct from people who no longer attend church because of some wounding that has pushed them away from church and/or Christian faith altogether. Rather, as the societal pressure to attend church (and even to identify as Christian) ebbs, it is becoming easier for people to prioritize other activities and relationships at times that, in days gone by, might have been reserved for communal practices of faith.

The Great Dechurching stands out from other books I have read recently on the changing dynamics of American religion. The authors partnered with reputable social scientists to collect more expansive, reliable, and analyzable data than can be gleaned simply through personal anecdotes (such as mine about Stuart). However, they also present profiles of the dechurched, telling stories of what is happening in the lives and hearts of people who have stopped participating in a faith community. In this way, the book gives both a sense of having responsibly collected real and

relevant data across denominations *and* of caring deeply about what these trends mean for those of us who are trying to pastor through the “largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country.” The authors talk about what might be at stake long term due to mass dechurching, including the loss of churches as places of goodwill in our neighborhoods and the worrisome rise of a secular political Right.

What you will not find in *The Great Dechurching* is a litany of best practices for making your church more attractive to consumers. There is no advice on making church more “seeker-friendly,” improving the music, installing better signage, or hiring a more dynamic youth pastor. Rather, Davis, Graham, and Burge emphasize there is a far deeper need for relationship and personal invitation:

“If there is one single application from our research that you walk away with, please let it be this: invite your dechurched friends back to a healthy church with you. But unlike a simple nudge to go back to the gym, we would do well to open the doors of our homes and chairs at our table. We aren’t just telling them they should go back to church; we are inviting them into our lives, which includes church.” (p. 123)

A significant challenge for this idea of hospitality, however, is that the data reveals a clear correlation between socio-economic class and dechurching. Poorer Americans are leaving organized religion behind at the highest rates. The authors postulate that American institutions in general, including churches, tend to work best for people who successfully follow a particular life sequence. The authors share their strong opinion that churches must look critically at how we show hospitality, share friendship, and offer real belonging to people who are single or of lower income and/or education levels.

In their last chapter, Davis, Graham, and Burge attempt to help church-going Christians understand the change around them through a spiritual lens. Amid the religious shift underway, one of the most poignant experiences for American Christians will be the loss of (or at least decrease in) the levels of power and influence they have enjoyed over the last century. The authors describe this as a kind of “Exile,” and lift up the self-knowledge, discipleship, and generosity that such a period in the life of the American church might bring. Of course, others are describing this same moment more disparagingly, often in terms of “decolonizing” an American church that has often done great harm by favoring the wealthy and privileged. But I do appreciate the addition of these authors’ more gentle approach, which is to name the pastoring and “disciplining people through the loss of power” that must happen—even alongside prophetic critique of the church’s complicity in colonialism and other types of oppression.

I read *The Great Dechurching* alongside a book group of clergy friends, most who serve in The Episcopal Church. The book was written by evangelicals and is mostly about evangelicals (though some of the research did look at dechurched

mainline Christians and Roman Catholics), but its message of struggle and hope—when adjusted for different theological traditions—feels descriptive of what the vast majority of Christian institutions are facing in terms of declining membership and participation.

The most challenging questions raised by this book in my study group were: *What does it mean to “bring them back [to church]?” And, should we even be trying to bring them back?* Perhaps intentionally, Davis, Graham, and Burge do not spend much time defining what it means to be “churched.” For example, is regularly attending a Sunday worship service the most important practice of being “churched?” Is someone who does not (or cannot) attend Sunday worship, yet maintains other faith practices, necessarily outside of the church?

Also, while the authors mention the reality of “dechurched casualties” (people who have been irreparably wounded by or disillusioned with church), this book does not focus on that experience. They enter the conversation with the assumption that the church is inherently a worthwhile thing to be part of. Most members of our book group were much more critical. They expressed a lack of confidence that what many of our institutions currently offer (Eurocentric traditions, systematically racist structures, communities that aren’t as welcoming as they purport to be) are really worth coming back to.

I found *The Great Dechurching* to be, ultimately, a hopeful book. It is helpful to know that the patterns we are seeing are part of a much larger phenomenon—not solely due to our particular congregation’s inadequacies and failures. Yet God is at work, in the hearts of people who are saying “no” to the church as it currently is, and in the pastoral leadership of those who are called to guide God’s people through this time of uncertainty and into something new. *The Great Dechurching* gives me more compassion, and more hope, for both.