

Praise for *The Great Dechurching*

Every church leader—either lay leader or ordained—needs to read this book to understand who is leaving churches, why they are leaving, and what it will take to bring them back. *The Great Dechurching* overflows with practical wisdom about the sobering reality of dechurching. While there is top level assessment of the numbers, the heart of the book is about people we all know and love. I am giving copies of this book to the clergy in the diocese where I serve, and I will assign it for the seminary courses I teach.

—**Justin S. Holcomb**, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida, seminary professor, and author

If you know someone who used to go to church and now doesn't, this book is for you. Jim Davis and Michael Graham have written a timely, necessary, and extremely beneficial resource that will compel and prepare those of us in the church to reach out to those who have left. *The Great Dechurching* is full of robust research that offers real hope and true help. This might be one of the most significant books you will read. May God use it to call many back to his beloved bride, the church.

—**Courtney Doctor**, director of women's initiatives at The Gospel Coalition, Bible teacher, and author of *From Garden to Glory*, *In View of God's Mercies*, and others

We all know that an annual physical is important; most of us also see it as more of an inconvenience than anything else. But talk to one close friend or family member who discovers a life-threatening health issue that could have been prevented had they not neglected their physical for years, and suddenly the annual checkup seems like less of a hassle. After ignoring obvious symptoms for decades, the church needs lab work to assess her health. In *The Great Dechurching*, Jim Davis and Michael Graham with researcher Ryan Burge do just that, and their diagnosis is generally not encouraging. But the book does far more than offer an empirical diagnosis. They offer

a plan of care for the church that can lead to renewed life in our churches, the return of many dechurched, and a greater gospel impact in our world.

—**Ed Stetzer, PhD**, professor and dean, Talbot School of Theology

This is one of those books I wish did not have to be written—but it did—on a topic I wish we didn't have to think about—but we do. I am so glad Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan Burge have teamed up to do it. We need responsible voices analyzing what is happening, and that makes me especially grateful for the way these authors approach the subject of dechurching.

This book is a clarion call, but it is not without hope or counsel. Instead of the mere pragmatism that often characterizes projects like this, the authors offer theological, confessional, and catechetical recommendations with ecclesiological convictions. The reader will still have to do the hard work of application to his or her own situation, but the reflection and action this book will spark could be significant. God is always up to something in moments like this, and we want to respond in wisdom and faithfulness to be instruments for his good purposes.

—**Ligon Duncan**, chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary

Many Christian leaders and commentators have commented on trends in American church life. All of them will find something in *The Great Dechurching* that surprises them. But the appeal of this book isn't just bound up in the data it shares, as valuable as that is. Graham and Davis offer much in the way of shrewd analysis of the data and sober reflection on what it means for the life of the church in America. That analysis and reflection both elevate the book and offer to followers of Jesus a vision for how the next chapter of the Christian movement in America can be better than the one now coming to a close.

—**Jake Meador**, editor-in-chief, *Mere Orthodoxy*

Few things break my heart like watching friends leave the church behind. *The Great Dechurching* starts with bad news: I'm not alone. America is undergoing the largest, fastest religious shift in its history. Forty million people have left the church. But there's still hope. Many dechurched Americans

are open to coming back. Using insights drawn from Jim Davis and Michael Graham's writing, we've welcomed hundreds of dechurched people into our local church community, where they can encounter Jesus and construct life-changing relationships.

—**Patrick Miller**, pastor, author, and cohost of *Truth over Tribe*

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

The Great De church ing

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

The Great De church ing

Who's Leaving, Why Are
They Going, and What Will It
Take to Bring Them Back?

Jim Davis and
Michael Graham
with Ryan P. Burge

Foreword by Collin Hansen

 **ZONDERVAN**
REFLECTIVE

ZONDERVAN REFLECTIVE

The Great Dechurching

Copyright © 2023 by James Davis and Michael S. Graham

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

Zondervan titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@Zondervan.com.

ISBN 978-0-310-14588-2 (audio)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Davis, Jim (Pastor), author. | Graham, Michael S., author. | Burge, Ryan P. author.

Title: The great dechurching : who's leaving, why are they going, and what will it take to bring them back? / Jim Davis, Michael S. Graham, Ryan Burge.

Description: Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 2023.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023009932 (print) | LCCN 2023009933 (ebook) | ISBN 9780310147435 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780310145875 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Ex-church members. | Church work with ex-church members. | Church attendance—United States. | Non-church-affiliated people United States. | BISAC: RELIGION / Christian Church / General | RELIGION / Christian Living / Social Issues

Classification: LCC BV4523 .D38 2023 (print) | LCC BV4523 (ebook) | DDC 262—dc23/eng/20230425

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023009932>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023009933>

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations taken from the (NASB[®]) New American Standard Bible[®], Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.Lockman.org.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version[®]. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design and photography: Micah Kandros Design

Interior design: Sara Colley

Printed in the United States of America

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

To our church family at Orlando Grace Church

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	xv
<i>Introduction</i>	xix

Part 1: Meet the Dechurched

1. What Is at Stake?	3
2. Who Are the Dechurched?	21

Part 2: Profiles of the Dechurched

3. Cultural Christians	39
4. Dechurched Mainstream Evangelicals	54
5. Exvangelicals	65
6. Dechurched BIPOC	79
7. Dechurched Mainline Protestants and Catholics	98

Part 3: Engaging the Dechurched

8. Reasons to Hope	119
9. Relational Wisdom	133
10. The Missed Generational Handoff.	148
11. Messages for the Dechurched.	164

Part 4: Lessons for the Church

12. Spiritual Formation and the Dechurched	185
13. Confessional and Missional	199
14. Embracing Exile	215
15. Five Exhortations to Church Leaders	226
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	241

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

Table of Figures

1.1	The Religious Affiliation of 18-to-35-Year-Olds	6
1.2	What Year Did You Last Attend a Congregation a Few Times a Year?	8
1.3	How Big of an Influence Were Your Parents in Dechurching?	10
1.4	Mainline Protestant Percent of US Population	13
2.1	Religious Service Attendance by Sexual Orientation	23
2.2	Share Who Identify as Republican among Never or Seldom Attenders	32
3.1	What Did Your Parent Do That Played a Role in Your Decision to Stop Attending?	47
3.2	Reasons for Not Attending Church	49
4.1	Issue Positions of Still Churched and Dechurched Evangelicals	59
4.2	Reasons for Leaving Church	61
4.3	Reasons for Returning to Church	62
5.1	Reasons for Not Attending Church	75
5.2	Reasons for Returning to Church	76
6.1	Reasons for Leaving Church (18–25)	90
6.2	Reasons for Leaving Church, Young Professionals (26–39) . . .	91
6.3	Parental Reasons for Leaving Church	92
6.4	Reasons for Returning	94
7.1	Theological Positions of Dechurched Mainline/Catholic	106

7.2	Reasons for Leaving Church (Mainline)	107
7.3	Reasons for Leaving Church (Catholic)	108
7.4	Prioritize What a Congregation Should Do	109
7.5	About What Year Did You Last Attend a Congregation a Few Times?	110
7.6	Percent Dechurched by Education and Tradition	112
7.7	Which of the Following Standards and Practices Do You Seek to Follow in Good Faith?	113
10.1	Share Believing in God without a Doubt	149
10.2	Most Difficult Transition in Maintaining Faith.	150
10.3	What Made the Transition from Teen to Young Adult Difficult?	155
10.4	Religious Involvement during College Years among Evangelicals.	158
10.5	How Big of an Influence Were Your Parents When It Comes to No Longer Attending Church?	160
11.1	Reasons for Dechurching.	166

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

Foreword

WE'RE LIVING AMID THE LARGEST AND FASTEST TRANSFORMATION OF religion in American history, what Jim Davis and Michael Graham describe as the “Great Dechurching.” Aided by Ryan Burge, this book deploys the best cutting-edge research on some forty million Americans who have left the church in the last twenty-five years. You’ll find in this book the most comprehensive, detailed reasons that our friends, family, and neighbors have left the church.

But Davis and Graham don’t leave church leaders in despair. They show us the reasons these millions might return to the church. They write with pastoral perspective on the kinds of churches that can thrive in our secular age. Best of all, they ground their counsel in biblical and theological reflection that has sustained God’s people for thousands of years.

We have no reason to fear even if the church across the West continues to lose political and cultural power. After all, consider the context of the Bible itself. In Daniel 1:12–13, the titular brave young man knows he’s playing with house money, even though he’s been torn away from his home and carried away in exile. Daniel acts like he knows the final score of the game before it’s even played—you try your diet, and we’ll try ours. His tone is less defiant than confident. Why isn’t he phased? Because his heart belongs to God, no matter where he lives. He’s not anxious. Babylon is only his temporary home. He’ll serve there with distinction. But his heart belongs with

God, who is the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega, the Lord of Babylon and Jerusalem.

By contrast, many American Christians today suffer from anxiety because they feel like they've lost their home. They may not have been taken away from their houses and land and churches. But they don't feel like their nation or state or city feels like home any longer.

When we're anxious and afraid, we get angry. And no one wants an angry neighbor.

Daniel, however, was a great neighbor. In Daniel 1:17 we see how he blesses Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar.

Daniel knew where he lived: Babylon. Where do we live? My home city, Birmingham, is Babylon. My home state, Alabama, is Babylon. The United States of America is Babylon.

Three times in the New Testament we see that exile is our status as believers in Christ until Jesus returns or calls us home. One of these passages is Hebrews 11:13–16, which urges Christians to follow the example of faith shown by the saints of the Old Testament:

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (ESV)

Daniel belongs in this hall of faith, these heroes of the Old Testament who anticipated the Savior to come. As God's Son, Jesus Christ wasn't dragged kicking and screaming from his home at the Father's right hand. He came to Babylon willingly! To rescue us. He

endured exile so that all who repent of their sins and believe in him could go home.

We might live in Babylon right now, but thanks to Christ, one day we'll live in New Jerusalem. We're in exile now. But soon we'll be home.

Until then, *The Great Dechurching* will help you live by faith in Babylon.

Collin Hansen

Executive Director

The Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

Introduction

THE SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE OF OUR CITY, ORLANDO, FLORIDA, HAS changed more than most could have imagined thirty years ago. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Orlando looked like it would be the new Christian Mecca. First Presbyterian Church was the second-largest mainline church in the nation. First Baptist Church was booming, and their pastor was president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Northland Church, pastored by Joel Hunter, grew to more than twenty thousand people. He has served as a spiritual adviser to the president of the United States and now serves on the board of the National Association of Evangelicals.¹ His son Isaac planted a church downtown that drew thousands of millennials and even some NBA players, including Dwight Howard. Reformed Theological Seminary expanded to Orlando, and soon after, the largest parachurch missions agency in the world, Campus Crusade for Christ, relocated its headquarters here. R. C. Sproul and Ligonier, Wycliffe, Pioneers, and about a dozen other Christian ministries followed suit. Every aspect of the theological spectrum seemed to be booming in Orlando as Benny Hinn and Paula White also pastored churches here. Now Orlando has the same percentage

1. Kate Shellnutt, "Joel Hunter Is Done Pastoring His Orlando Megachurch," *Christianity Today*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/august/joel-hunter-stepping-down-northland-senior-pastor-orlando.html>.

of evangelicals as New York City and Seattle² as 42 percent³ (roughly 2 million people) of our metropolitan area have stopped attending church. We call them the *dechurched*.

What has happened here is happening all over the country. The national aspect of this phenomenon hit me when I (Jim) was giving a brief talk at a donor event for a global ministry with attenders from all over the country. I spoke for about ten minutes about dechurching and was followed by a nationally known pastor who gave a great, more general gospel-centered keynote message.

After the evening session was finished, people lined up to speak with me, ask me questions, and give me business cards, offering to help in any way with our work. In a somewhat surreal moment, I looked over to see the other speaker getting coffee by himself. I was confused at first, but the logic soon settled in. He was the better speaker with the bigger platform, but when it came to dechurching, I was talking about this audience's friends, children, and grandchildren. They had seen the people they love most depart from the institution they need the most: the church. The dechurched aren't just numbers on a spreadsheet; they are people we know and love.

What began as a desire to equip our local church through a podcast called *As in Heaven*, became a research project that eventually developed into this book. Our desire to effectively reach the dechurched in Orlando and to help prevent more dechurching unexpectedly took on a national scope. We had anecdotal observations and experiences with the dechurched, but those could get us only so far. There wasn't much data available, and what was out there was older and wasn't going through academic review boards. We could find nothing recent that comprehensively explained why people are leaving, where they are going, and what we can do to bring them back.

2. Barna Report Orlando, Daytona Beach, Melbourne 2017–2018 Report.

3. 2018 Barna Report on Metro Orlando.

It isn't hard to see the spiritual landscape changing fast, but we desired something more than our street-level view. We needed reliable, science-driven data, and thanks to the generosity of like-minded people, we were able to raise significant funds to make this data possible. We engaged social scientists Dr. Ryan Burge and Dr. Paul Djupe to do an academic-review-board-approved, nationwide, quantitative study to answer our questions about the dechuraching phenomenon.

Dr. Ryan Burge is a political scientist at Eastern Illinois University, where he is also the graduate coordinator. His work focuses on the interaction of religion and political behavior, especially in the American context. In addition, he is the research director for Faith Counts, a nonprofit, nondenominational organization that promotes the social value of faith. He is the author of *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* and *20 Myths about Religion and Politics in America*.

Dr. Paul Djupe is a political scientist at Denison University, directing the Data for Political Research minor and specializing in religion and politics, social networks, gender and politics, and political behavior. He is an affiliated scholar with Public Religion Research Institute and the editor of the Religious Engagement in Democratic Politics series with Temple University Press. He has authored, coauthored, or edited eight books that focus on religion and politics.

When the results of our study came in, not only were our basic hunches confirmed, but the results were more shocking than we expected. The size, pace, and scope of dechuraching in America is at such historic levels that there is no better phrase to describe this phenomenon than the Great Dechuraching.

The Three Phases

The research conducted by Burge and Djupe was collected in three phases. In each stage, the research team contracted with research

industry standard Qualtrics⁴ to find survey respondents and to ensure the academic reliability of each participant. For each of the three surveys, the instrument was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Denison University. The goal of the IRB process is to ensure that no harm will be done to those who participate in the research, and that their privacy and anonymity will be ensured by the research team. In all three cases, IRB approved the survey without issue.

Phase 1: How Big Is the Problem?

For the purposes of our study, we defined a dechurched person as someone who used to go to church at least once per month but now goes less than once a year. The first phase of the study was simple. We sought to prove or disprove this thesis: *We are currently in the middle of the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country.* This phase included a population size of 1,043 American adults.

The data we collected overwhelmingly supported our thesis. Before now, the largest religious shift in church attendance in the US occurred during the twenty-five-year period after the Civil War.⁵ From 1870 to 1895, church attendance more than doubled as people resumed their postwar lives.⁶ That religious shift pales in comparison to what we are seeing today, only instead of going back to church, people today are leaving church. About 15 percent of American adults living today (around 40 million people) have effectively stopped going to church, and most of this dechurching has happened in the past twenty-five years.

Something important to note is that only phase 1 of this project

4. Qualtrics has been used in the publication of hundreds of papers in peer-reviewed outlets across the social sciences, and data collected in this manner is seen by scholars as being of very high quality.

5. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 23, fig. 1.2.

6. Finke and Stark, 23, fig. 1.2.

was focused on collecting a general sample equivalent of the American population. In phases 2 and 3, Qualtrics was given subsample quotas to meet in terms of dechurched Americans and dechurched evangelicals. This means that only the data collected in phase 1 can be used to estimate the rate of dechurching in the United States.

Phase 2: Who Is Leaving and Why?

The aim of phase 2 of the study was to compare differences and similarities between churched and dechurched people from all religious traditions. It included a population size of 4,099 dechurched American adults. In phases 2 and 3, the main goal of the data collection was to produce a data set meaningfully large enough for a machine-learning algorithm to create profiles of different types of dechurched persons. Hence, all those who took part in these later surveys were themselves dechurched.

This means that in spite of the large sample size, when we write that a certain percentage of the dechurched people in our sample fell into a specific profile or cluster, one cannot infer that the same percentage of all dechurched people in the United States would be in that same cluster. The goal of phases 2 and 3 was not to acquire a random sample of dechurched individuals but merely to survey a large enough number of the dechurched to conduct this analysis in a statistically rigorous way.

Phase 2 found that no theological tradition, age group, ethnicity, political affiliation, education level, geographic location, or income bracket escaped the dechurching in America. In this phase, we were able to create models for dechurched mainline Christians and dechurched Roman Catholic Christians. We learned that every possible category of people is leaving the church. Yes, some groups of people are leaving faster than others, and some are leaving earlier than others, but all groups and classes of people are experiencing dechurching at historic levels.

Phase 3: What Is Happening in Evangelicalism?

The third phase of our study focused specifically on those who had dechurched from evangelical churches. It included a population size of 2,043 dechurched American adults. As leaders in an evangelical church, we were especially interested in this group. Through the help of machine learning, a branch of artificial intelligence (AI) and computer science that uses algorithms to interpret large quantities of data, we were able to identify four distinct groups of dechurched evangelicals, each with very different animating concerns and each with different paths back. These groups are cultural Christians; dechurched mainstream evangelicals; exevangelicals; and dechurched Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).

This book is the compilation of our research and our practical pastoral applications to better understand and address the Great Dechurching. An important caveat. We are pastors, not scholars. Our hope is that this intersection between the academy (the research) and the church (our application of the research) will render reliable, helpful, and actionable results for many different expressions of the local church and that scholars in many fields would build on this conversation with their unique skills and experience. Our findings confirmed our grim assumptions about the state of churchgoing in the US today, yet they were also surprisingly hopeful in many ways. All is not lost. In fact, the American church's greatest work may well be ahead.

Part 1

Meet the Dechurched

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

Exclusive Pre-Order Preview

Chapter 1

What Is at Stake?

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. These are what we now call the dechurched. About 40 million adults in America today used to go to church but no longer do, which accounts for around 16 percent¹ of our adult population. For the first time in the eight decades that Gallup has tracked American religious membership, more adults in the United States do not attend church than attend church.² This is not a gradual shift; it is a jolting one.

1. For the purposes of this book, we are going to say there are 40 million dechurched adult Americans. There were 258.3 million adult Americans in the 2020 census, hence, 15.5 percent of American adults are dechurched.

2. "U.S. Adult Population Grew Faster Than Nation's Total Population from 2010 to 2020," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/united-states-adult-population-grew-faster-than-nations-total-population-from-2010-to-2020.html>; and Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls below Majority for First Time," Gallup, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

Historical Context

There have been roughly three periods of rapid growth in religious adherence in the United States: the First Great Awakening (1730s–1740s), the Second Great Awakening (1790–1840), and the four decades following the Civil War (1870–1906).³ From 1700 to 1776, religious adherence grew in the US from 10 percent to 17 percent. Interestingly enough, and perhaps contrary to popular opinion, “Historians of American religion have long noted that the colonies did not exude universal piety. There was general agreement that in the colonial period no more than 10–20 percent of the population actually belonged to a church.”⁴ Finke and Stark estimate the national religious adherence rate to be 17 percent in 1776 with 3,228 congregations and an estimated 242,100 members.⁵

Rates of religious adherence rose significantly between 1776 and 1850, from 17 percent to 34 percent, primarily due to the Second Great Awakening that roughly spanned the fifty-year period from 1790 to 1840.⁶ Despite this rapid growth, the fastest period of growth in religious adherence was the twenty-five-year period after the Civil War.⁷

From 1870 to 1895, church attendance more than doubled, from 13.5 million people to 32.7 million,⁸ as the general population grew from 38.6 million⁹ to 69.6 million people.¹⁰ The net result was a

3. Accurate data on religious adherence and churching is difficult to find before 1776, but Roger Finke and Rodney Stark have done excellent work in their book *The Churching of America, 1776–2005* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

4. Finke and Stark, 29.

5. Finke and Stark, 29.

6. Finke and Stark, 23.

7. Finke and Stark, 23, fig. 1.2.

8. Finke and Stark, 23, fig. 1.2.

9. “1870 Fast Facts United States,” United States Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1870_fast_facts.html.

10. “1890 Fast Facts United States,” United States Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1890_fast_facts.html; “1900 Fast Facts

12 percent increase in churchgoers.¹¹ Because this growth happened in the short span of only twenty-five years, it became the largest religious shift in the history of our country until now. What we have witnessed in the last twenty-five years is a religious shift about 1.25 times larger but going in the opposite direction. In that time, about 40 million people have stopped attending church. More people have left the church in the last twenty-five years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and Billy Graham crusades *combined*.¹² Adding to the alarm is the fact that this phenomenon has rapidly increased since the mid-1990s.

The 1990s is when churchgoing in America really changed. As Ryan Burge writes, “The early 1990s was an inflection point for American religion. Between the early 1970s and 1990s, the share of Americans who had no religious affiliation had only risen two points. But from that point forward, the nones would grow by a percentage point or two nearly every year through the following three decades.”¹³ Here the term *nones* refers to those with no religious affiliation.

So, what happened? While there is room for nuance on the acceleration of dechurching in the 1990s, three factors cannot be overlooked. First, during the Cold War, the terms *American* and

United States,” United States Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1900_fast_facts.html. Note that the 1895 population is approximated by taking the average of the 1890 and 1900 censuses.

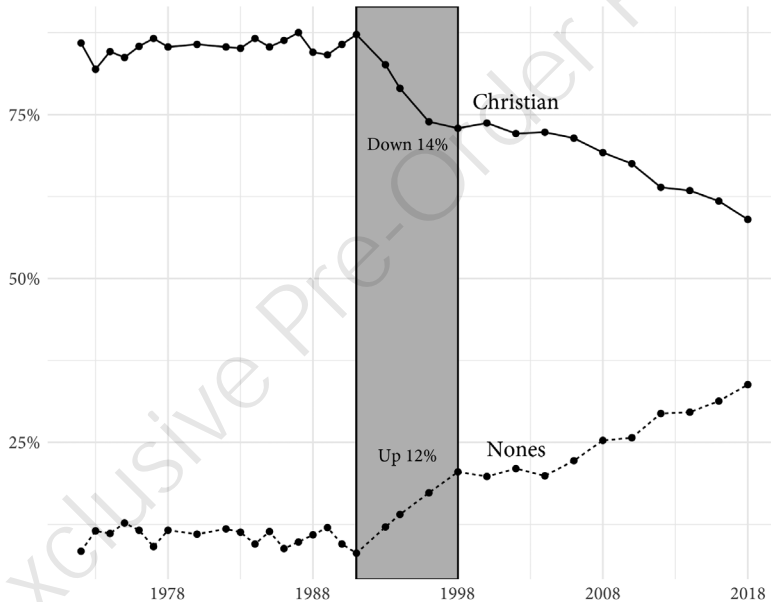
11. Reworking of figure 1.2 as found in Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 23.

12. Finke and Stark, 23, fig. 1.2: 17% of US churched in 1776 (First Great Awakening doubled churching, adding some 2.5 million adherents), Second Great Awakening added 10% churched (from 35 to 45% from 1870 to 1890, adding 14.9 million adherents). The worldwide Billy Graham crusades added some 3.2 million people over the course of the Billy Graham crusades, according to Billy Graham Evangelistic Association staff. https://web.archive.org/web/20081203122410/http://cincinnati.com/billygraham/p_man.html.

13. Ryan Burge, “OK Millennial: Don’t Blame the Boomers for Decline of Religion in America,” *Religion News Service*, August 30, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/08/30/ok-millennial-dont-blame-the-boomers-for-decline-of-religion-in-america/>.

Christian were often used synonymously in our struggle against a nation that posed an existential threat to America's way of life. President Ronald Reagan called the Soviet Union "the Evil Empire." During this period, we added "In God We Trust" to our currency and "under God" to our Pledge of Allegiance. When the Soviet Union collapsed and that struggle ended, it became more culturally acceptable to be both American and non-Christian.

Figure 1.1. The Religious Affiliation of 18-to-35-Year-Olds



Second, there was fallout from an increasingly polarized religious Right. Under the influence of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, Pat Robertson's challenge to the George Bush GOP, and Newt Gingrich's uncompromising takeover of the House, Americans in the middle associated Christianity exclusively with these movements

and began to let go of all of it. The formerly religious middle began to join the budding ranks of the nones.

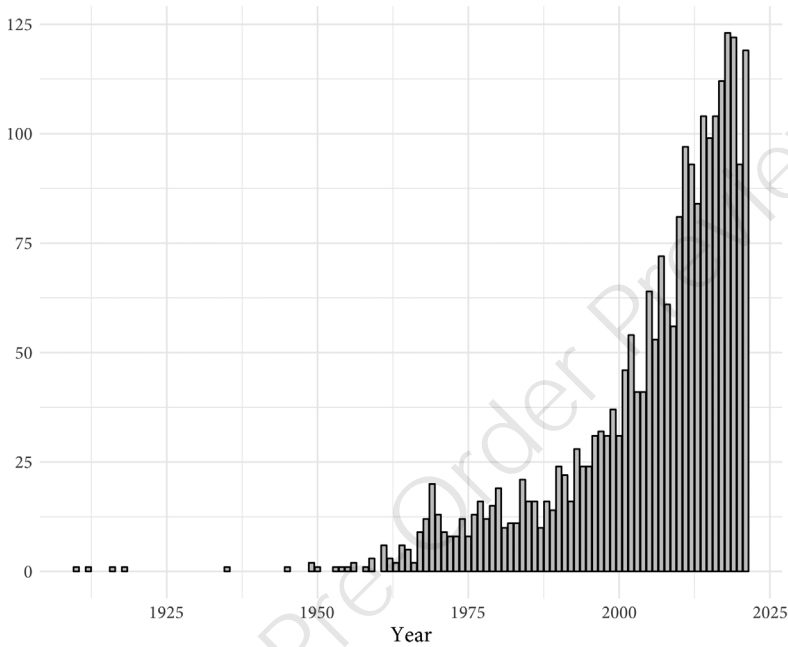
Third, we cannot overstate the influence of the internet in driving the acceleration of dechurching in America. Even though the internet was slow and, according to the Census Bureau,¹⁴ only in 20 percent of American homes by 1997, students had access to the World Wide Web in schools. In 1994 the internet cafe was born, and the first internet connections in public libraries became available. For the first time, people could easily and regularly engage a wide range of worldviews very different from their own and collaborate in communities with others questioning their faith without the risk of social and familial opposition.

The size and scope of this shift away from church is unprecedented in our country. Dechurching is an epidemic and will impact both the institutions of our country and the very fabric of our society within our lifetime. This seismic shift in religious belief and church attendance is a new era in American history we call the Great Dechurching.

An important aim in our study was to find the last time someone attended church more than once per year (fig. 1.2). Whatever the reason (and we will explore those reasons in depth), the numbers were staggering as we realized that most of the dechurching has happened in the last twenty-five years and is accelerating. At some point, the rate of dechurching will slow down, not necessarily because the underlying reasons have been mitigated, but simply because there won't be enough people going to church regularly to sustain the rate of people leaving the church. The dechurched will give way to the unchurched—those who never attended church to begin with.

14. Camille Ryan, "Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2016," United States Census Bureau, August 2018, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/acs/ACS-39.pdf>.

Figure 1.2. What Year Did You Last Attend a Congregation a Few Times a Year?



The Stakes

The erosion of the religious foundation of 40 million people will have widespread reverberations. The dechurching implications for America fall into three main categories: what is at stake relationally, religiously, and culturally. With respect to what is at stake relationally, we will look at the toll dechurching is taking on families and friendships. Then we will look at the implications religiously for churches, denominations, and networks. Finally, we will examine what is at stake culturally, looking at the impact of dechurching on communities, culture, and country.

What Is at Stake Relationally: Families and Friendships

The dechurched phenomenon is a tremendous source of pain for many at the familial level. I (Mike) was talking with a woman recently who has four adult children. They all grew up in the church and in Christian schools. This woman is one of the kindest, godliest, and sincerest people I have ever known. She is a fabulous mom and overall person. However, three of her four kids don't go to church and are completely done with Christianity. Imagine her pain.

We have spent countless pastoral hours talking, praying, and agonizing with parents and grandparents who are in anguish over their family members who have left the church. And the more we talk with people over age fifty, the more this dynamic seems to be the norm rather than the exception. Some of these stories include addiction, destructive behaviors, gender and sexual confusion, and even suicide. Anecdotally, we know of almost no parents over the age of fifty who don't have at least one adult child who is dechurched. Many pray for hours each week that God will bring their children or grandchildren to the faith and back to a good church. We've prayed with some parents for their dechurched children for nearly twenty years. We cannot understate the pain, anguish, and grief they face.

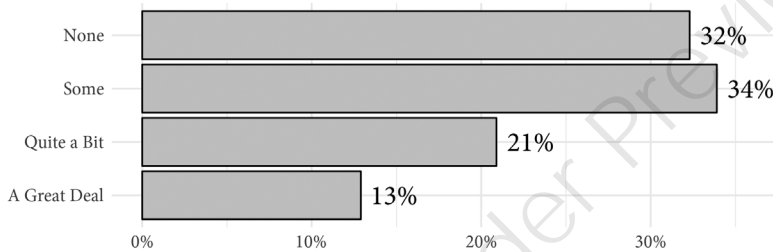
On the other hand, relational tension with a parent can often be the cause of a child leaving the church. We learned in our research that 68 percent of dechurched evangelicals said their parents played a role in that decision (see fig. 1.3).

We will spend most of chapter 10, "The Missed Generational Handoff," unpacking what we learned about the dechurched and their relationship with their parent(s), but for now the top five reasons cited in our study were:

1. All their emphasis on culture war lost me over time (14%)
2. Their lack of love, joy, gentleness, kindness, and generosity (14%)

3. Their inability to listen (14%)
4. Their inability to engage with other viewpoints (13%)
5. Their racial attitudes or actions (13%)

Figure 1.3. How Big of an Influence Were Your Parents in Dechurching?



The dechurching phenomenon has become disruptive between multiple generations of family members, causing two-way relational tension between parents (and grandparents) and their adult children that has no quick fix. Among dechurched evangelicals, about two-thirds expressed that their parents' evangelical faith played a role in pushing them away from church. Much of this tension can be summarized by either a difference in political vision or in one's affective posture toward culture and society. The chasm is wider in some profiles than others, and there is a lot of hope in these relationships with growth in relational wisdom. Later in the book, we explore what is going on and to see if there are some best practices to help relieve some of that tension.

Among evangelicals in our study, there is a higher rate of marriage among the dechurched (77%) than there is among people who are still actively churched (62%). Dechurched evangelicals in our study also have a lower rate of divorce at 8 percent compared

to 13 percent among still churched evangelicals. One might expect the opposite, but when you read more on the profiles in the coming chapters, you will see that there is quite a bit of complexity to the various profiles. Any good study will produce results that challenge our assumptions and cause us to think with greater depth and nuance about what we are observing.

Dechurching doesn't just impact multiple generations of families; it also has impacted our friendships. Anecdotally, at least half of my (Mike's) friends with whom I grew up and went to church with don't go anymore. More recently people who used to go to church together have just stopped going altogether. This is sad and disappointing, and it leaves us with a lot of complex emotions. We miss these people dearly, and cumulatively their absence is reshaping whole churches, denominations, and networks.

What Is at Stake Religiously: Churches, Denominations, and Networks

For the first time in the Gallup poll's eight-decade history, in 2020 church membership in the United States fell below 50 percent in America.¹⁵ From World War II all the way to the mid-1990s, church membership among adults was nearly always above 70 percent. The precipitous decline occurred across all religious traditions and, as we've already stated, began to pick up steam in the mid-1990s. Membership has dropped by roughly a third across all religious traditions over the last twenty-five years. This invariably has caused more churches to close and has made it more challenging to plant new churches.

According to Lifeway Research, in 2019 approximately 3,000 Protestant churches were started in the US, but 4,500 Protestant

15. Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Gallup, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

churches closed.¹⁶ Just five years prior, in 2014, the same Lifeway study found that 3,700 churches had closed and 4,000 had opened. As you can see, the rate of church planting has slowed, and the rate of church closures has accelerated. The dechurching phenomenon is likely a large factor in those shifts.

According to the 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) study on all kinds of faith communities, “the vast majority of the country’s congregations are small. 70% of these faith communities have 100 or fewer weekly attendees. Only 10% of them have more than 250 in weekly services. However, far more people attend these larger congregations—roughly 70% of all attendees—than the many smaller ones.”¹⁷ Churches under 100 people comprise 69 percent of all churches. However, 70 percent of all US church attenders go to churches that have 250 or more people.¹⁸ Hence, smaller churches are far more common; however, far more people attend larger churches when you add up the sum total of people in those larger churches. The dechurching phenomenon is likely to hit smaller churches proportionally much harder, and we will likely see more consolidation of churches into medium and larger churches.

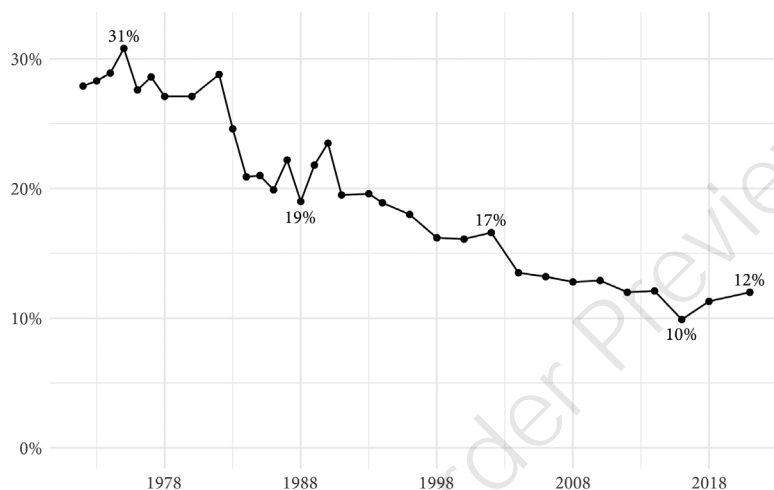
If the church closing and planting trends from 2019 continue, we will continue to see the total number of Protestant churches in America decline. As the overall numbers of members in a denomination decline, we are likely to see a drop in financial giving toward the denominations and networks with which these churches belong. This will put strain on denominations, their global missions efforts, their domestic ministries, and their academic and theological institutions.

16. Aaron Earls, “Protestant Church Closures Outpace Openings in U.S.,” Lifeway Research, May 25, 2021, <https://research.lifeway.com/2021/05/25/protestant-church-closures-outpace-openings-in-u-s/>.

17. Scott Thumma, “Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview,” Hartford Institute for Religious Research, 2021, <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>, 5.

18. Thumma, 5, fig. 2.

**Figure 1.4. Mainline Protestant
Percent of US Population**



The 40 million Americans who have left houses of worship represent a total annual income of \$1.4 trillion dollars.¹⁹ According to Nonprofits Source, the average American Christian gives 2.5 percent of their income.²⁰ Seventy percent of Americans self-identify as some type of Christian tradition,²¹ so that means conceivably \$24.7 billion dollars *per year* just left Christian churches. The economic impact of these losses cannot be underestimated and will have implications beyond just individual local churches.

Dechurching has been particularly pronounced in some

19. Figure derived from \$35,384 per capita income in 2020 times 40 million people. "QuickFacts United States," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/SEX255221>.

20. "Church and Religious Charitable Giving Statistics," Nonprofits Source, <https://nonprofitssource.com/online-giving-statistics/church-giving/>.

21. PRRI Staff, "The 2020 Census of American Religion," PRRI, July 8, 2021, [https://www.prri.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/#:~:text=More%20than%20four%20in%20ten%20\(41%25\)%20identify%20as%20Protestant,Jewish%2C%20Muslim%2C%20and%20Hindu.](https://www.prri.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/#:~:text=More%20than%20four%20in%20ten%20(41%25)%20identify%20as%20Protestant,Jewish%2C%20Muslim%2C%20and%20Hindu.)

unexpected places such as the secular right (which we will address in chapter 2) and in the Bible Belt. We have seen this both in our study and in the largest and longest religious data study in America, the General Social Survey (GSS). Historian Daniel Williams's analysis of the GSS²² has shown that this rising secular right is marked by hyper-individualism, law and order, insensitive racial attitudes,²³ cynicism toward institutions, anti-abortion, and libertine positions on sexuality. Williams concludes,

For decades, many pundits have warned about the political dangers of a Southern Christian Right that was intent on blurring the boundaries of church and state. But whatever those dangers might have been, perhaps the greater threat to democracy in the South right now is a de-churched populist Right that is just as angry about efforts to correct racial injustice and even more individualistic.

Whether we call it "evangelical" or simply "Southern populist," this post-church Southern Protestant Right is not going to go away just because the Southern Baptist Convention loses members. In fact, it's likely to become stronger than ever.²⁴

The rise of those dechurching on the secular right will reshape not just the Southern Baptist Convention but all denominations, especially among evangelicals. This dynamic will not just impact churches, denominations, and networks but will also continue to remake communities, culture, and country.

22. Daniel K. Williams, "White Southern Evangelicals Are Leaving the Church," *Christianity Today*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/august-web-only/church-attendance-sbc-southern-evangelicals-now-lapsed.html>.

23. Williams. "They opposed 'preferential hiring' for Blacks by a margin of more than 4 to 1. Likewise, by a margin of more than 4 to 1, they agreed with this statement: 'Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same.' When asked why Blacks, on average, had 'worse jobs, income, and housing than white people,' nearly half said it was because they 'just don't have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves out of poverty.'"

24. Williams.

RYAN BURGE: One of the primary lenses through which demographers can track religious decline is through denominational records. Almost every large religious tradition has been tracking their total membership for decades as a means of understanding where churches are growing and where they are declining. Anyone who has been in church administration for a while knows that membership records are far from accurate. Churches don't want to cull people from the rolls because there's always the possibility that they will return to church one day and express offense when seeing that their name has been purged from the official records. However, despite their drawbacks, denominational records are still one of the best data sources that exist when it comes to tracking the growth or decline of American religion.

The portrait they paint is not a rosy one. For instance, in 1990 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America reported 5.25 million members. In 2020 the total membership was just over 3 million—a decline of 41 percent. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has seen its membership drop 58 percent during the same time period. The United Church of Christ is down 52 percent, and the United Methodist Church has seen a decline of 31 percent. The Episcopal Church, which used to be one of the most influential denominations in the United States, has just half a million people in the pews on an average Sunday and just 1.5 million members total.

This trend is not relegated to mainline traditions alone. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which is the largest evangelical denomination in the United States, has also seen a serious decline in membership in recent years. In 2006, 16.2 million people aligned with the SBC; now that number is 13.7 million. Between 2020 and 2021, the SBC lost nearly 410,000

members. That's the largest single-year loss in the 170 years of the Southern Baptist Convention.

There are two bright spots when it comes to membership. The Assemblies of God, an evangelical denomination with ties to the Pentecostal tradition, has seen their membership numbers rise 50 percent over the last three decades. They also enjoy a high level of racial diversity, while many other Protestant traditions are still overwhelmingly white. The other area seeing positive growth is nondenominational Protestant Christianity. While it's impossible to collect membership statistics on these types of churches, on surveys the portion of Americans who identify as nondenominational rose over the last decade while other traditions like Baptist, Methodist, and Lutheran have all declined.

What Is at Stake Culturally: Communities, Culture, and Country

Healthy communities have economies, laws, organizations, and institutions that, by and large, work for all the members of that community. A quick scroll through social media or stroll past strongly worded neighborhood yard signs in some communities will reveal the obvious: American culture and society are not just polarizing, but fracturing.²⁵ We've seen protests of all sorts, digital vitriol, uptick in conspiratorial rhetoric, and all sorts of cultural events with widely diverging opinions from the same event. One such national Rorschach test was January 6, 2021, where large portions of the country see treasonous domestic terrorists attacking the nation's seat of power and threatening the life of our second-highest ranking

25. "Political Polarization in the American Public," Pew Research Center, June 12, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

official, whereas another large part of the country sees American patriots defending the Constitution. It is hard not to look at such divergence and conclude that the country has serious problems it has to address.

The country is increasingly partisan and politically polarized. It used to be that median Democrats and median Republicans weren't that far apart ideologically on political values. Now, however, the gap between them has widened considerably, causing significant erosion of centrist Americans.²⁶ This dynamic has complex roots, but it's clear that there is also a decreased trust in a wide array of institutions. Further, only 25 percent of Americans now place their trust in other Americans.²⁷

We don't know anyone who hasn't lost friends over the last few years. To maintain friendship in real life or online, it feels like people must agree with you on whole new lists of things that we didn't have in the past. Some of those new litmus tests might be wise, but some can be quite unhealthy. If someone is saying racist or cruel things on the internet or in real life, then wisdom probably merits some relational boundaries. However, maybe it isn't the best idea to end relationships over viewpoints on climate change, gun control, or a whole host of other matters.

It only makes sense that the fracturing of American culture and society and the erosion of American institutions it has caused would spill over into the pews. *Christianity Today* CEO, Tim Dalrymple, noted the following:

New fractures are forming within the American evangelical movement, fractures that do not run along the usual regional,

26. Lee Rainie and Andrew Perrin, "Key Findings about Americans' Declining Trust in Government and Each Other," Pew Research Center, July 22, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/22/key-findings-about-americans-declining-trust-in-government-and-each-other/>.

27. Rainie and Perrin.

denominational, ethnic, or political lines. Couples, families, friends, and congregations once united in their commitment to Christ are now dividing over seemingly irreconcilable views of the world. In fact, they are not merely dividing but becoming incomprehensible to one another.²⁸

Cultural, sociological, ideological, and experiential factors are rapidly and radically sorting American culture and society. Consider the wide varieties of opinions among the people in your life regarding Donald Trump, January 6, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, COVID-19, gun control, #ChurchToo, and #MeToo.

Christianity Today editor-in-chief Russell Moore put it this way:

In many of these [formerly religious] places, to be a grown-up and not a rebel or weirdo meant you attended church. Yet increasingly, I once argued, it was less and less necessary for people to go to church for those cultural reasons.

What I didn't count on was that cultural Christianity would be infected with a delta variant and morph into something else.

The kind of cultural Christianity we now see often keeps everything about the Religious Right except the religion. These people aren't in Sunday school, but they might post Bible verses on Facebook (or quote them on TikTok).²⁹

The same is true for those running for office. To get votes, you need to appeal to the evolving religious Right that looks increasingly more like civil religion than it does gospel religion. Going to church used to confer positive social capital, especially in the Bible Belt, but

28. Timothy Dalrymple, "The Splintering of the Evangelical Soul," *Christianity Today*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/april-web-only/splintering-of-evangelical-soul.html>.

29. Russell Moore, "When the South Loosens Its Bible Belt," *Christianity Today*, August 11, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/august-web-only/russell-moore-white-evangelicals-bible-belt-south-church.html>.

increasingly what is imputing positive social capital is mirroring the political civil religion of your immediate physical context and the makeup of your digital community. That knife cuts both ways politically. If you are in a blue city, state, or digital ecosystem, then you need to say certain things to maintain thick social ties. In our current situation, that might look like expressing sentiments around politics, policy, gender, sexuality, or race. This is simply the logical outcome of an increasingly polarized America.³⁰

When we consider what is happening in families, friendships, and communities, it isn't hard to trace a trajectory for the country. More cultural fracturing, more privatization, erosion of institutions, loss of public trust, and thinner communities. Even if you have no faith whatsoever, a case can be made that dechurching is impacting you, your community, and your country negatively. Consider the fact that nearly all hospitals and orphanages in America were religiously founded to promote well-being in culture and society. A similar thing can be said for many of our country's earliest universities and educational institutions. One study notes that religiously affiliated nonprofits comprise 40 percent of the social safety net in America.³¹

Dechurching will invariably diminish resources that provide relief, care, and aid to the poor, disenfranchised, sick, hurting, and otherwise needy. Further, increasing atomization and retreat into our digital selves putting additional strain on the societal fabric.

It is impossible for 40 million American adults leaving their former houses of worship not to reshape communities across the country. Some will be impacted by long-standing churches closing

30. "As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration with the Two-Party System," Pew Research Center, August 9, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/>.

31. "Faith-Inspired Nonprofits Provide 40 Percent of Social Safety Net Spending but Can Still Be Overlooked by Donors, according to New Bridgespan Group Research," Bridgespan Group, January 28, 2021, <https://www.bridgespan.org/about-us/for-the-media/faith-inspired-nonprofits-provide-40-percent-of-social-safety-net-spending-but-can-still-be-overlooked-by-donors-according-to-new-bridgespan-group-research/>.

their doors. Others will experience churches with diminished capacity to do good works. The fabric of those communities will be weaker if the connective-tissue role that churches often play becomes more hardened and sclerotic. Many studies have shown that vibrant faith communities often provide tremendous benefit to the broader community.³²

The net result of dechurching could be diminished human flourishing, connectivity, cohesiveness, and overall shalom.

Reason for Hope

While the situation is bleak, there is plenty of reason for hope. We want to see our friends, family, and people in our community return to church so we can build better cities around the kind of human flourishing that derives from a robust gospel. The goal isn't to make us a Christian nation but to see how Christians impact the culture we live in. The keys to addressing the Great Dechurching will be whether churchgoing people will be willing to seek understanding, relate with wisdom, build healthier institutions, embrace our exilic nature, and seek a gospel that is true, good, and beautiful. In the next chapter, we will look at the high-altitude observations from our study on who the dechurched are and draw some initial ministry implications.

32. Tyler J. VanderWeele, "Religious Communities and Human Flourishing," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 5 (October 2017): 476–81, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29170606/>.