



People's to People

Newsletter of the People's Church of Dover

United Church of Christ

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"The great dechurching could be the beginning of a new moment for churches, a moment marked less by less focus on individuals aligning themselves with American values and assumptions. We could be a witness to another way of life outside conventionally American measures of success. Churches could model better, truer sorts of communities they look more like the sorts of communities Jesus expected his followers to create."

Note from the Pastor: The lectionary scripture the other day brought us a reminder that we are commanded to follow God's values, and not to conform to the common-sense (but perverted) values of contemporary American culture. A new book by an evangelical pastor arrives at the same conclusion! Christ creates a very different community – one that rejects that values promoted by our economic system. Do you agree with the following argument?

The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going to Church

Opinion by Jake Meador, *The Atlantic*

What if the problem isn't that churches are asking too much of their members, but that they aren't asking nearly enough?

Nearly everyone I grew up with in my childhood church in Lincoln, Nebraska, is no longer Christian. That's not unusual. Forty million Americans have stopped attending church in the past 25 years. That's something like 12 percent of the population, and it represents the largest concentrated change in church attendance in American history. As a Christian, I feel this shift acutely.

This change is bad news for America as a whole: Participation in a religious community generally correlates with better health outcomes and longer life, higher financial generosity, and more stable families — all of which are desperately needed in a nation with rising rates of loneliness, mental illness, and alcohol and drug dependency.

A new book, written by Jim Davis, a pastor at an evangelical church in Orlando, and Michael Graham, a writer with the Gospel Coalition, draws on surveys of more than 7,000 Americans by the political scientists Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe, attempting to explain why people have left churches and what, if anything, can be done to get some people to come back. The book raises an intriguing possibility: *What if the problem isn't that churches are asking too much of their members, but that they aren't asking nearly enough?*

Contemporary America simply isn't set up to promote mutuality, care, or common life. Rather, it is designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success. Such a system leaves precious little time or energy for forms of community that don't contribute to one's own professional life.

It is true that religious abuse and general moral corruption in churches have driven people away. But Davis and Graham find that a *much larger share of those who have left church have done so for more banal reasons*. The book suggests that the defining problem driving out most people who leave is ... just how American life works in the 21st century. Contemporary America simply isn't set up to promote mutuality, care, or common life. Rather, it is designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success. Such a system leaves precious little time or energy for forms of community that don't contribute to one's own professional life. Workism reigns in America, and because of it, community in America, religious community included, is a math problem that doesn't add up.

Work should be judged not by the money it generates but by the people it serves. In a workist culture that believes dignity is grounded in accomplishment, simply reclaiming this alternative form of dignity becomes a radical act.

For most Americans who were once a part of churches but have since left, the process of leaving was gradual, and in many cases they didn't realize it was even happening until it already had. It's less like jumping off a cliff and more like driving down a slope, eventually realizing that you can no longer see the place you started from.

What can churches do in such a context? In theory, the Christian Church could be an antidote to all that. What is more needed in our time than a community marked by sincere love, sharing what they have from each according to their ability and to each according to their need, eating together regularly, generously serving neighbors, and living lives of quiet virtue and prayer? A healthy church can be a safety net in the harsh American economy by offering its members material assistance in times of need or – just as important – it reminds people that *their identity is not in their job or how much money they make; they are children of God, loved and protected and infinitely valuable*.

A vibrant, life-giving church requires more, not less, time and energy from its members. It asks people to prioritize one another over our career, to prioritize prayer and time reading scripture over accomplishment. This may seem like a tough sell in an era of dechuraching. If people are

already leaving — especially if they are leaving because they feel too busy and burned out — why would they want to be part of a church that asks so much of them?

Although understandable, that isn't quite the right question. The problem in front of us is not that we have a healthy, sustainable society that doesn't have room for church. *The problem is that many Americans have adopted a way of life that has left us lonely, anxious, and uncertain of how to live in community with other people.*

The tragedy of American churches is that they have been so caught up in this same world that we now find they have nothing to offer these suffering people that can't be more easily found somewhere else. American churches have too often been content to function as a kind of vaguely spiritual NGO, an organization of detached individuals who meet together for religious services that inspire them, provide practical life advice, or offer positive emotional experiences. Too often it has not been a community that through its preaching and living bears witness to another way to live.

Many of the wounds and aches provoked by our current order aren't of a sort that can be managed or life-hacked away. They are resolved only by changing one's life, by becoming a radically different sort of person belonging to a radically different sort of community.

The theologian Stanley Hauerwas captured the problem well when he said that “pastoral care has become obsessed with the personal wounds of people in advanced industrial societies who have discovered that their lives lack meaning.” The difficulty is that many of the wounds and aches provoked by our current order aren't of a sort that can be managed or life-hacked away. They are resolved only by changing one's life, by becoming a radically different sort of person belonging to a radically different sort of community.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells his first disciples to leave their old way of life behind, going so far as abandoning their plow or fishing nets where they are and, if necessary, even leaving behind their parents. A church that doesn't expect at least this much from one another isn't really a church in the way Jesus spoke about it. If Graham and Davis are right, it also is likely a church that won't survive the challenges facing us today.

The great dechurching could be the beginning of a new moment for churches, a moment marked less by aspiration to respectability and success, with less focus on individuals aligning themselves with American values and assumptions. We could be a witness to another way of life outside conventionally American measures of success. Churches could model better, truer sorts of communities, ones in which the hungry are fed, the weak are lifted up, and the proud are cast down. Such communities might not have the money, success, and influence that many American churches have so often pursued in recent years. But if such communities look less like those churches, they might also look more like the sorts of communities Jesus expected his followers to create.

Guest speaker

**REV. DR.
STARSKY
WILSON**

President and CEO,
Children's Defense
Fund



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Evangelicals Rejecting Jesus' Teachings as 'Liberal Talking Points'

Pastor Story by Aila Slisco, Newsweek

An evangelical leader is warning that conservative Christians are now rejecting the teachings of Jesus as "liberal talking points."

Russell Moore, former top official for the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) who is now the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, said during an interview aired on NPR's "All Things Considered" this week that Christianity is in a "crisis" due to the current state of right-wing politics. Moore has found himself at odds with other evangelical leaders due to his frequent criticism of former President Donald Trump. He resigned his position with the SBC in 2021 following friction over his views on Trump and a sex abuse crisis among Southern Baptist clergy.

In his NPR interview, Moore suggested that Trump had transformed the political landscape in the U.S. to the point where some Christian conservatives are openly denouncing a central doctrine of their religion as being too "weak" and "liberal" for their liking:

Multiple pastors tell me, essentially, the same story about quoting the Sermon on the Mount, parenthetically, in their preaching—'turn the other cheek'—[and] to have someone come up after to say, 'Where did you get those liberal talking points?' When the pastor would say, 'I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ' ... The response would be, 'Yes, but that doesn't work anymore.' That's weak. When we get to the point where the teachings of Jesus himself are seen as subversive to us, then we're in a crisis.

Moore went on to say that he did not think it would be possible to "fix" Christianity by "fighting a war for the soul of evangelicalism," urging his concerned brethren to instead fight "small and local" battles like refusing to go along with the current "church culture."

During an interview with *Semafor* last month, Moore warned that Trump posed "a unique threat, both to American institutions and to the church's witness." He added that he had provided political and spiritual advice to candidates running against Trump in the 2024 GOP presidential primary.

Evangelicals are a key voting block for Republicans. Exit polls of the 2020 presidential election indicated that up to 81 percent of white evangelical Protestant voters cast ballots for Trump over then-future President Joe Biden, according to Gallup.

During an interview on conservative network *Real America's Voice* in January, Trump lashed out at certain evangelical leaders that he said displayed a "great disloyalty" by being reluctant to back his 2024 presidential run. "That's a sign of disloyalty," Trump complained. "There's nobody that did more for the movement than I have. And that includes the movement of evangelicals and Christians and the movement very much of 'right to life.'"

Updates from the Trustees

Moderator

We brought our study of spiritual disciplines to a close in July, and then members of the study group shared some insights with the congregation during a recent worship service. (Thank you everyone!) Richard Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline*, is highly acclaimed as a modern guide for those seeking a closer relationship with Christ through the timeless practices of meditation and prayer, solitude and service, and other disciplines. It is not just a book to be read, but an invitation to make these practices part of your spiritual life and growth. The book can be ordered from many sources or can be downloaded for free from several web sites. It is worthy of a place in your library.

The next study group will meet during the season of Advent. If you have suggestions for a topic or a particular book, pass your ideas to Rev. Hodge.

Serena will be leading the Meditation group on the 2nd Wednesday of September (9/13) at 10 am. The new meeting room on the 2nd floor has been redecorated and air conditioned(!). All interested are invited to participate.

The After School Drop-in Program will soon be gearing up for another year with new leadership. John Finney and Frances Perry will be teaming up to coordinate and

supervise the program for children and youth as we continue to find ways to serve the needs of our neighborhood.

Many will recognize Mr. Finney as the multi-talented (artist, chef, karate black belt) gentle giant who has been devoted to our men's shelter for several years. MSgt. (ret.) Perry is also a familiar face around here. She helped lead our recent praise service, has volunteered for the after-school program, and is working on a ministry for military veterans. Activities will begin mid-September. The hours of operation and details of the program are to be announced.

During the summer months, The Center for Children and Youth partnered with Mr. Larry Normile and the Next Generation Outcome to provide services to area youth in difficult situations. They met weekdays in our gym for recreation and used the 2nd floor classrooms for guided study and mentoring.

Let there be light! What a difference the new lighting makes in our building. It's more cheerful and more inviting for members, visitors, and potential partners in ministry. And, as several have said, now we can see the words in the hymnal. New lighting fixtures and cost-efficient, long-lasting LED lights have been installed throughout the building, from basement to third floor. The lights in the gym were terribly outdated, outrageously expensive to use, and very difficult to change when a bulb burned out. Ask Randal (and others) how difficult and dangerous it was to change light bulbs in the sanctuary. Climbing a ladder straddling pews on a slanted floor is not for the faint of heart. And the basement no longer looks like a dungeon, but a welcoming, cheerful

space. Funds for the project came from grant money and our Capital Campaign.

Be sure to sign up for Happy Hour refreshments, serving as liturgist, and providing altar flowers for worship. Sign-up sheets are posted on the bulletin board.

Would you like to serve as a greeter on Sunday morning? All you need is a smile and a welcoming attitude. We're encouraging people to use the main entrance to the sanctuary and it would be nice to have a greeter to give them a bulletin and make them feel at home.

Did you know? We have a group of volunteers who call themselves the Birthday Brigade. They divide up the year and send birthday cards to members during their designated months. It's just another expression of our love and hospitality. If you haven't gotten a card, maybe we don't know when your birthday is. Just let the church office know. In fact, it would be helpful to have updated information about all of our members. People frequently change phone numbers, email or addresses and we might not know when you do. Help us out so we can keep in touch.

– Jim Caldwell

Communications

Our website is updated! Be sure to visit and tell your friends about our redesigned website: www.peopleschurchofdover.org.

Thank you to Aerielle Kohout for the photographs. If you like her work, please be sure to check out her Facebook page- Images by Aerielle. Also with our improved website, you can view the livestream of services

without needing to be on Facebook or YouTube- you can watch it from the webpage on our site.

Looking forward- please submit to me any ideas, suggestions or comments for promoting People's Church of Dover to our immediate community and beyond. In-person events, social media ideas to uplift our Facebook family and so on, are much appreciated. I am the coordinator for communication, but I am not a one-person team, I require your input to make communications and promotion successful. I can be reached by email at jenniferchildears@yahoo.com.

– Jennifer Childears

Stewardship

While we have been emphasizing stewardship, and all of its faces and facets, throughout the spring and summer, the season for pledge canvassing at Peoples is fast approaching. Thinking about Peoples Church Family giving the message that emerges is actually sweet and sour.

Our Peoples Church family, while small, has proven itself very generous. In the past year, just 43 donors committed to raising \$171,000 to refurbish and resurrect the church and its mission. On a side note, \$133,000 has already been received and put to use just a year in.

Peoples Family cares: You have opened the church to the community, to feeding programs, to sheltering, counseling services, medical screening and contact services. Come in on a Tuesday and you'll find the once silent hallway filled with the laughter

and hooting of kids having a ball, playing ball in the upstairs gym.

You've opened the church sanctuary to other religious groups that they may worship Christ in their own special way. The sweet side of Peoples giving is indeed deep!

That being said, there is a stone-cold reality that the costs of operating Peoples Church, year to year, exceed the collection of tithes by close to triple. Of 63 letters mailed out last fall we received 29 responses and a congregation pledge of \$74,000. This to cover operating costs of near \$300,000 for 2023. Unsustainable and a sour note for sure!

The committee would just ask that as stewardship pledging time approaches you look into your heart, take earnest, private counsel with God, and consider increasing your tithe in the coming year. Rest assured, your gifts, sacrifices, and tithes are a cherished Blessing, and we thank God for them ...and for you!

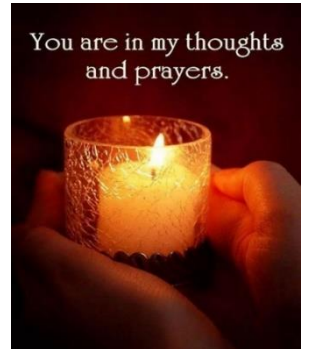
– Gerald Rice

Pastoral Care

We are holding in prayer:

Folks facing Various Struggles:

Lyn Arnold
 Bill and Jane Dodd
 Judy Reed
 JoEllen Smith
 Josie Strong
 Darien and Rita



Our Homebound Members:

Lester Gallihue	Pat Hufnal
Gertrude Weissenfluh	Mary Johns
Sandy McNinch	Ethel Sedule

Family and Friends:

Phyllis Simpkins (*Robin's mother*)

If you know of someone who should be on this list, call the office at 302-674-4177 or email office@peopleschurchofdover.org

– Edward Middleton

