



8 Friends. All under the age of 25. Former staff members and leaders in churches and denominational offices. A self-employed graphic designer, a party planner, a salesman, a violinist, a horse whisperer, a banker, a photographer, a convenience store manager, a nurse, a car dealer employee, and a PHD candiate. Bloggers, friends, and spouses. They all tell the story of how they walked away from the traditional models of church and how they are now exploring alternative models of community and practice.

This is our attempt at sharing our stories. Beyond the statistics and figures. Beyond George Barna's book, Revolution, with pseudo names. We have nothing more than real stories and real experiences that tell of how we walked away, were forced out, or fired. Some of our stories our painful and we still need time to heal the wounds as we "detox". Some of our stories our hopeful as we have found alternative ways to live the way of Jesus in our world.

This is neither an attempt at being critical or to minimize the role and value that many of the traditional models of church still have and play in God's economy. These are simply the faces behind the stats, that tell us that young people are leaving the church at a fairly rapid rate. At a time in history when many pastors and church leaders are bemoaning and concerned with the loss of young people in their congregations . . . we . . . the young, creative, gifted, and called twenty-somethings . . . have been pushed to the margins. We now stand on the outside looking in at a time when the church most needs us.

In a time and place when the church could use a fresh influx of creativity, a wider diversity of theological perspectives, and a more outward focus on the community, young leaders are walking away from the church at a rather rapid pace.

We hope you enjoyed this little experiment. I want to thank all of my good friends who took some time to share with us their stories and guest blogged on my site. You should check out each and everyone of their sites. They are all great bloggers and worth following.

Josh

www.iamjoshbrown.com/blog

Leslie

www.leslientreece.wordpress.com

Nicholas

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Eric

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Josh

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In March, after 7 years of full or part time staff positions, he walked away from a salary, benefits, retirement, and vacation time and gave up a ministry speaking and ministering to high school students because he no longer felt like he was valued or "fit in". Burned out on full time church work at the age of 25. With a BA in Religion, 7 years of mentoring, speaking, and staff experience, and a "calling from God", he is now on the outside looking in.



To be fair, I never got fired or exiled from a church. I did work part or full time for 4 different churches in 7 years. One in Alabama and 3 in Atlanta. I've interned for those churches. I've worked in the graphic design department in those churches. And I've worked in student ministry in those churches. 3 of the 4 churches that I worked for would be considered "mega-churches" with between 1,500-4,000 Sunday morning attendance. With one church having over 15,000 Sunday morning attenders. I've sat in creative meetings planning the services, led small groups, mentored students, and spoke on a weekly basis. In 7 short years, I've run the spectrum on being a part of traditional church models. And at the ripe young age of 25, I was burnt out and made the decision to walk away, leaving behind a full time paycheck and full benefits (retirement and insurance). I now work from home, find community around my kitchen table, and have only been to 2 "services" in 6 months.

My biggest struggle, and ultimately why I left the church, was because I had this feeling like I no longer "fit in". It's hard to be around friends and people who you care about and to not feel like you belong. To work alongside people for a common goal and to feel like the odd man out. Perhaps that feeling came from my own insecurities. But it's a weird thing to be pouring your life into something alongside great men and women and to feel like a fake. I always felt like that if I was totally honest and open about my thoughts on God, politics, relationships, theology, etc. that I would no longer be "esteemed" or respected like I was. Again, to be quite fair, I never really fully gave anyone a chance to hear my full thoughts on things. But anytime I stepped outside the box and stretched things out a little, I was quickly confronted with words and faces that reminded me of my place.

One example was when over lunch I tried to have a conversation about politics. And how I differed with the views of the group and why I differed. I did my best to respectfully and humbly disagree. However, I was essentially minimized and told how no one could believe what I did and be "right with God". The same thing happened when thinking about certain aspects of theology. And if it wasn't a conversation, it was with snarky comments peppered throughout the week by various people that created a culture that made you fearful to go against the norm. Whether it was in meetings, conversations over lunch, or behind closed doors, there just wasn't a lot of space for things that were different.

I understand the perceived problems that "openness" can create in an organization. Or in doctrine. Or in practice. But there has to be some wiggle room. Everything can't be as easy as black & white statements on paper that you have to agree to in order to belong. There was just this underlying feeling that you had to believe rightly before you belonged fully. Instead of belonging fully regardless of whether or not you believed the same things on every issue.

There is just not a lot of space for diversity in most churches. Diversity of belief. Diversity of practice. Diversity of politics. Diversity of theology. Diversity of lifestyle.

If any place should be inclusive, I feel like it should be the church. If any place should be embracing of diversity, I feel like it should be the church.

What is sad to me is that if this is the way members of the "camp", members of the same team, get treated . . . how much worse do people who aren't on the same team get treated?

Understandably, after we left, there were some who were hurt because they felt like we our walking away was a critique of them. And they were hurt because they felt like we were turning our backs on the thing that we had been "building" together. But after we left, we have never felt more alone than at that time. Our phones quit ringing. Our doorbells were silent. And our email boxes empty. Hurtful things were said about us. Attacks were made on our characters. And rumors were spread. If there was any hope of us plugging back in with another community, it was lost after that. Again, if people who you spent 40+ hours a week with, people who you laughed and cried with, people who you loved gave you the cold shoulder after you explored other perspectives and orientations . . . how much worse do total strangers and people not a part of the family get treated?

The thing is, I could probably still be involved with a local church to this day were it not for these types of reaction. I'm not naive enough to think that I'm right on anything. That I've got the market cornered on theological perspectives or politics or my lifestyle. Nor do I expect everyone to arrive at the same conclusions that I have. I embrace the fact that we all have different perspectives. But there is something about having your thoughts and perspectives continually get minimized and silenced that is extremely harmful to an idealistic, creative, passionate 25 year old with nothing but visions of changing the world dancing in his eyes. There is something about watching your wife cry herself to sleep because of attacks that makes you a tad bit nervous about even wanting to "fit in" anywhere else at any point.

But I do miss things. The regular community. Accountability. Encouragement. Friendship. Serving. But at this point, we are simply content to explore alternative ways of enjoying those things in our life. And while I miss certain things, we are doing it on our own.

So here I am. 25 years old. Creative. Gifted. An amateur theologian. A thinker. A dreamer. A conversationist. One of the guys the church is trying to attract. One of the guys that most churches would love to hire. In the prime of my life. And I can't work or serve there because most places wouldn't hire me or allow me to serve because of my theological views and my lifestyle choices. I just don't fit in. The only option is for us to plant and re-dream and re-imagine a new kind of faith community. Or to continue to do what we are doing now. And that is to sit on the outside looking in. This bothered me for a couple of months. But I realize on the outside of the church is probably a pretty good position for me to be. Because now my vision of the world is not colored by stain glass windows. But it's crystal clear and right in front of me. As I am in it's midst.



Leslie

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Leslie served as a Creative Arts Intern at a 3,000 member church. She was laid off due to financial reasons which is a situation that is unfortunately happening to a lot of fellow church workers. It was January 2, 2006 when she was laid off . . . she hasn't been back since. She's spunky, a great photographer, and a deep thinker.



"I cannot promise that you will make much money, but I can tell you that you will get paid before I do" - Pastor Ken in trying to hire Nick

It's been 8 months and 8 days since I felt the church stopped caring about me. It's been 8 months and 7 days since I stopped caring about the church.

So I wrote this whole thing trying to figure out why our generation seems to be leaving the church, but I realized that I don't know why or how or really even if they are. All I can tell you is my perspective and why I don't attend church right now, and why I'm sometimes still bitter.

And anyways, I have never been able to understand why it is called "The Church." I mean I understand the whole One Body, that's just it...we are not one body. We are a variety of different people, different ages, different personalities, and we all need a place to belong. So therefore, I don't think we should be one church or really one body but maybe a variety of bodies all asking a lot of questions.

Now, back to my sourness.

I have found that my bitterness or really my sadness comes from my experience working at a church. I found the church to be run as a business. Money before people, buildings before people, saving face before caring about the people. And maybe this could be a difference between younger and older generations. Younger generations find something very wrong with this (some not all) and older generations (some not all) find that this just the way it is. The quote above comes from a Pastor friend of ours when he was trying to hire Nick.

This blew me away and I think this is the way it should be....church should be a place to teach people how to put others before yourself. So, honestly it would be nice for the pastor to take pay cuts just to keep some staff on. It would be nice to stop funds for some carnival to keep some staff on. It would be nice to say, "Wow let's not build this building because it could mean that 10 of our people would not stay on payroll." People are not dollar signs. People matter. And they don't just matter while you are briefly greeting them at the door. They matter when they are at home with their family and when they are working in the office down the hall.

And this is why I'm staying out of church right now. Being apart of church staff made me feel used and unimportant. The pastor greeted me with smiles, but in the end I could tell there was very little genuine care. I also never felt validated. I always felt like nothing I did was good enough and that I almost had to compete with my fellow workers (one being my husband which didn't work out so well) just to get any recognition or positive feedback. And I was thirsty for it. And that's when it's a business and not a community.

Nick and I were talking the other night about the Emergent Church. And while I am still learning and forming my opinions about The Emergent Church (I think it is a positive thing, I am just wondering where I fit in with the conversation) we did talk about how well the Emergent Church's leaders are doing at making people feel validated. We mentioned Brian McLaren and our friend Josh Case (Josh, I want you to know that I think of you as a great person even though you tried to steal my victory...hahah just kidding again...I thought it was genius and hilarious!) These guys are great because in their interaction with other that make a point to complement you. So, in turn you stop being so paranoid that what your saying is crap, and really started listening and speaking up. When a person feels more free and confident, you realize they do a much better job. They start lifting others up too....What a concept!

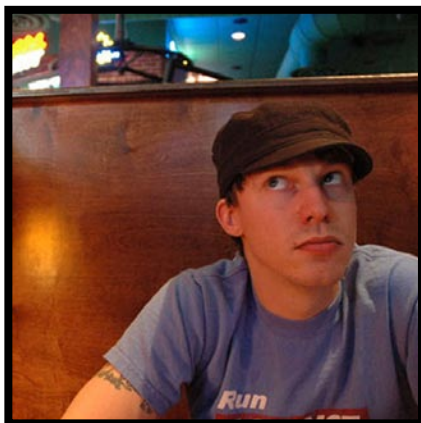
But I don't think people realize how much mentorship is important. Pastors have a chance to really lift a person up and I see that opportunity slipping away from so many younger people.

And new questions and ideas are good. Because someone thinks differently then you should challenge you, not threaten you. Asking questions, reading different books, having more questions than answers is important.

And let's not skip that important detail, maybe the most important. I have always had more questions than answers about Christianity. So until recently I thought this was a bad thing. I felt like I needed to get my act together. What I have come to realize is that the answers I have always been given do not work for me anymore. The answer, "Christ will live in your heart" does not work for me anymore. Really what in world does that mean??? And please do not try to answer that question.

I used to be so enthralled with the mega churches and I thought that was the answer for me, but I couldn't be more wrong. This is something I am finding in common with my equally bitter friends. We need real interaction. I need a smaller group of people that I feel accept me. I was never in a place in a church where I felt like I could ask the questions that I was dealing with. Where I could say that I like beer. Where I could cuss and that would be okay. Where I would not feel like a villain. I am ready for that. And for me it doesn't even need to be a "church." It just needs to be people open to discussion and acceptance of all questions.

So, I'm still trying to figure it out. It's messy but I'm cool with that. What about you?



Nicholas
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Nicholas Fiedler is a singer/songwriter/worship leader that most recently was a Youth Worship Director for three years at Sugar Hill UMC, in Sugar Hill, Georgia. He has since left 'church work' and works on his excellent blog and podcast as a venue for his ideas on the church. Nick now lives in Birmingham. I consider him my cohort, partner in crime, and friend.



Recently, Josh had an idea for his blogrollers to do a series based on our struggles with the Institution of the American Church and in response to the claim that a large number of our generation is leaving the church, especially the Saddleback/Willow Creek program driven Church.

Josh wanted us to explore, from personal experience, why this mass exodus is happening. I'll start with a little background information.

My grandfather was a Wesleyan minister and my first memory of church was his church. Next I remember a big Baptist Church in Virginia where I was baptized - this particular church had old women that protested outside the church on Sunday mornings. Thirdly, I remember another big Baptist Church in Alabama, I left that church while my family was still attending and went to a small Church of God (family came later). During the time of the last two churches I was attending a Presbyterian Christian High School, my Freshman year of college I took an internship at the Church of God. During one of those years I complimented the Church of God with a Holy Spirit Bible Study that met at an old train depot, (it was here that I 'got the spirit'), this was complimented further by a trip to Brownsville on my High School graduation trip. Three years into college I moved to Georgia and started an internship at a United Methodist Church that turned into a full-time job, currently my wife and I don't belong to a church in Birmingham where we live.

With all this background you may assume that I have a handle on this 'church thing', but I am more confused about it than ever. I can't say why many of my generation is leaving the church, but I can identify some things that make me hesitant to find a place. I broke it down

into three main parts. Not listed in order of importance, just listed.

Money

In this past year I read that if just the Evangelical Christians gave 10% of their money to the hungry of the world, there wouldn't be hungry people in the world. Later on reading things like the Embezzlement Report a lot of people my age have been looking at where the money the church gets is going. 90% of the money the church gets goes to. . . the church. When I was younger I couldn't tell you what big business was, I couldn't name a large business, but today I know all about WorldCom, Healthsouth, and Enron. Because the world started caring about where their money was going, we care where the money of the church goes. I just want to help the world, I don't want to make a building.

Working in a church during the some large global/national crisis' has show that people do want to give, but tithes were always the lowest during Katrina, 9/11, and the Tsunami that hit Asia. The reason the tithes were low was because people in the congregation were overtaken by the tragedy and gave to a specific cause, they did this, often times in lieu of their tithe. It hurt the church, but I think it also said something about how they thought their money worked. Their money would work better if they gave it to a secular/religious aid group than if they gave it to the church. What if the church operated so that the vast majority of the money went to vital global and local change the church body could group together to give to a cause, and the idea of giving to the church remains intact. Many house churches and even a group called Relational Tithe are doing things just like this. I think my generation finds this extremely appealing.

Community

The majority of churches want to be big, they yearn for it. That defines success for them. To be Willow Creek, Saddleback, or North Point, would be their goal. Numbers is the name of the game. This means sacrifice, it means a structuring that is program driven and goes at all costs to be all encompassing. It also means loosing a personal feel, loosing people in the crowd, sometimes trampling people, it means you need appointments to meet with your staff or congregation, it means you know less about a greater number of people, or worse you know a lot about a few people but you have a lot. It also means that your congregation looks a lot alike. When growth happens like that it is usually people that look the same, sound the same, have the same number of kids, vote republican, are white, whatever, during this growth you loose diversity and intimacy.

I think my generation needs smaller close-knit groups. Book clubs, coffee house meetings, pub studies – small groups, not as a program but as the church size. This would mean you could have all the congregation in your cell phone, know not only the person that sits next to you on Sunday, but know their screenname, their blog, and their Netflix preferences. I know a pastor in Atlanta who is basing his church off similar ideas, he bought new property that was smaller than the original church, when it fills up, they start a new community. They cap the size of the congregation. This draws me, and I think my generation as well.

Ethos

Ethos takes two forms. One could be the general aesthetics of the church. I think everyone has a different preference for what they want their church to be like. For me it would be in

a coffee house with wireless internet and a good on tap beer selection, or it would be an old abbey that had historic flare. Either way it would not be standard, it would not be pews, colored carpet, manufactured alters with a large bible and golden cross, etc. It would be personal, there would be art. It would inspire wonder and community. Most of our churches don't inspire wonder anymore. I get wonder when I walk into a coffee house or bar and it is bustling, everyone is talking, laughing, and being themselves. When most people enter a church building they change themselves into what they feel the building represents – stuffy, religious, and conservative.

I don't like to change myself, I don't like to have to be someone else in front of different people. I think that may be a trend not just with my generation though, but I think my generation won't go to a place if they feel they must change. They want a place that represents where they are at. Modern American Churches often fall very short here. The second part of Ethos is the feeling that is created by the church leadership and the people that attend the church. Many times churches can't help where they meet, well they could sell there building, give the money to the poor and meet in coffee houses.

BUT the second part of Ethos is made up usually by the leadership of the church. I think at least my friends and I are looking for a certain type of feel in a community. The top of the list is Conversation. Sermons are not conversations, they are lectures. In my life I have recently finished my college and lecturing is still fresh on my mind. I am not interested in attending lectures (Unless they are guest lectures on the psychology in David Lynch films). I am interested in working out theology, I am interested in someone who leads a discussion not a 'talk', I want to challenge the person speaking, and I want them to challenge me in turn. If church is an hour of someone telling me how to be a better person using a highly interesting book as a base, I want to be able to engage with the speaker and the text. Speak about practicality of it.

Remember when talk shows started, and the audience could start asking questions, they could even call in. I thought it was fascinating that Sally Jesse Raphael could be on the Television talking to someone and I could call in and give a question to that person. The show became partly Sally Jesse and Nick. Isn't the church one body? Shouldn't it be Jesus, Lead Talker, and Nick, and Leslie, and Nick's Friends, and the congregation? Some people say no, it should be church leadership and we listen. Some say we should work things out all together. A lot of those that are leaving the church would probably be with the later group.

Another part of this ethos is how we respond to each other, what we think we have right and what other people have wrong. I am looking for a church where embrace is the central foundation and we work things out with that as the center. Most churches think that Salvation Prayers, or Right Thoughts/Beliefs are the center. This leads to getting pissed at believers who just won't believe right, or believe like you. This leads to division, when perhaps differences in point of view could lead to a much more robust church. They feed that conversation ethos, they lead to relationships when people feel like they can talk about what they are learning, or what they are questioning. Churches seem scared of questions. Usually it is because the questions, however they are asked, offend the church as being an assault on the sacred scriptures or their divine doctrines. When in actuality it is only a questioning of an interpretation of such things that could lead to conversations pregnant with learning opportunities. Churches also seem scared of questions because questions bring change. They bring change in belief, change in tradition, change in people, change in church.

Maybe this is the ethos my generation is looking for, an ethos of productive change. God forbid Jesus gets as stale as those wafers that bear his name.

Summing this up, well it doesn't need a sum up. I don't know how accurately I have answered the question posed by Josh, 'Why Doesn't Our Generation fit in Church?' I can speak for myself though, I don't fit because I haven't found a community that works for me in the three stages listed above. I hope to God I do. If I don't find a building that contains it, I have plenty of mentors that write books, blogs that keep me engaged, and people to love, so I think I will be alright, but maybe, just maybe. My generation can group together and make our own communities. As always, thanks for reading.



Eric

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Eric is my good friend and blogs at FraggedForMySins.com. He's what we call a techie.

He and his wife served as English language school teachers within the local churches they attended in Georgia, ending up being the leaders of the small Language School in a church located in Gwinnett County. He also served as the leader for the video elements of services at this church for just over a year. Currently, they attend a small house church that meets in the home of their awesome friends, the D10s. Eric is a great guy, a Linux user, and a lover of all things pirates and ninjas (as you'll see from his blog).



So when Josh asked us to guest post on his blog about leaving the traditional model of the church, I wasn't sure what to focus on. I had plenty of things to talk about, but as I've learned... just because I want to talk about it doesn't mean that it is something you would want to listen to, or even should listen to.

That said... I read Josh's post, I read Leslie's post, and it makes me mourn. They use phrases like:

"Now, back to my sourness."

"It's been 8 months and 8 days since I felt the church stopped caring about me."

"But I do miss things. The regular community. Accountability. Encouragement. Friendship. Serving."

"I just don't fit in."

How can these things be? How can two people, each willing to give up half of their waking hours to the church (in their jobs and volunteer service) end up at this point?

I then consider my own experience. It was much less of a walking away from something, as it

was a discovering a new way of doing things, and then by the very nature of that discovery, my heart and affections turning to the new model of “doing church”.

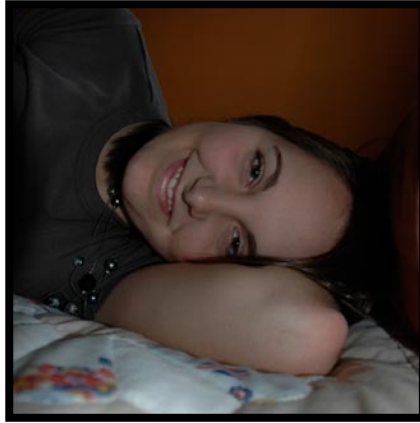
What was that new model of church? A small, little house church community graciously hosted in the home of my wife and I's awesomest friends, the D10's. The initial six of us started on a path that we do not know the end of, just seeking God as freely and openly with one another as possible. Since we started in October of last year, we've seen friends come, friends go, a baby adopted, a couple engaged, jobs come, jobs go, visitors from around the world, and a whole lot of community and God.

So why do I mourn? I know that there is life in other ways of doing church. I've experienced it. “Wouldn't that be cause for hope?,” you might say? And you may be right. The reason I mourn is that Josh, Leslie, and countless others had much more invested in the idea of the traditional church, and in their minds it left them hanging big time... while I, with only a small “stake” in church, was able to find life and community with very little effort and disruption. How can this be?

I guess that's where the hope starts for me, in the midst of the confusion in how the world and God and people work. While I'm by no means advocating house church as the best thing for our generation, I sure hope the fact that we have found consistent fellowship, community, and worship with other believers outside of the walls of a church building can serve as hope for them, and many others. Please don't read that as some sort of “I'm better than you, do it like we do it cause you will surely be awesome if you do.” The point isn't house church - the point is, there's a place every sort of believer can find community, its just some of them aren't quite as easily found as others.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.” - Mt 13:44.

I believe our house church has discovered a tiny slice of the kingdom of heaven in our relationships with each other and our meetings on Thursdays. I pray those of you reading this can find your own slice.



Anna

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Anna is a 23 year old sexy goddess who for some strange reason decided to marry me. For over a year she worked in the President's office of the North American Mission Board and watched the behind the scenes as things fell apart. She has also been a mentor to a group of high school girls who are now sophmores in colleges and some of our best friends. She is cute. She is cuddly. And for some strange reason she has taken an interest in cross-stitching. Go figure. She now works at a car dealership and hasn't been to church in 6 months.



This is all a really new experience for me. I don't write about these things often, really think about them much if I'm fair. That's why I married a man who does. He challenges every part of me. And we've surrounded ourselves with people who do. I resonate with so many of the inputs and opinions around me, I just don't spend as much time "chewing" on this stuff as many of my close friends do. But I enjoy being a spectator. And learning tons while I challenge my brain over dinner conversations and video chats.

I think I'm right in the middle of Leslie's perspective and Eric's, obviously with different insights on both ends of the spectrum. I'm Leslie because I've been burned and it hurts. I've been a member of the competition. And I'm not proud of what I became. I'm Eric because I think it should be different and it makes me sad.

All of that disclaimer was to say that a large portion of the "church" part of my life is an "I don't know."

I'm not sure how I feel about mega churches right now. I do know I don't "fit" there anymore. I don't know if I think house churches are the way to go 100%. I do know that being involved as little as I have, I've never had a more real encounter with Christ as when we attended a friend's house church. I can't pinpoint an exact reason why I feel what I do, but I'll give you a few of my viewpoints and allow you to see through my eye gate for a while.

I think if I'd never started dating Josh, I would have been elbow-deep in Wednesday night

church right now. Dancing in the front row at the big “Christian” concert. Thinking alcohol is evil. Pointing fingers at couples who live together before they are married. Praying for those who “have fallen away from the church.” At the bookstore on midnight on the release date of the latest Max Lucado book, no offense Max.

It wasn't until recently I started to realize how crazy that lifestyle is. Not for everyone, but for me. I never knew I would enjoy a glass of wine with dinner. I wasn't allowed to entertain the idea. I had never been in the shoes of an “outsider” as Southern Christian Culture defines them. Now I'm one of them. And I'm having the time of my life. I'm connecting with God on a whole new, deeper level.

All of this adventure has come at a cost, though. We've lost relationships. We've chosen to lose jobs. But we've gained more than we could have imagined. It took a while though, and we couldn't find our place.

There became no space for us in the traditional church setting. We didn't belong in leadership anymore, having no heart for the agenda of most churches we had been involved with. We didn't belong in membership, having no real avenues for community. We didn't fit. People would encourage us to share our thoughts, to be open. Then look at us like we had 2 heads after we became brave enough to finally add to a conversation.

There was no room for us to throw away our 9-5 jobs and that be okay. No space for us to miss church on Sunday mornings and that be acceptable. No ability for us to want to raise our children in monastic community and that not be weird. To want our money to count for something other than buildings and intelligent lights. To want to sleep in big pallettes in the living room with our kids for weeks on end if that's what they want to do (ht: Andrew Jones). For us to watch 6 year-olds care more about the JCPenney Christmas Catalog than other people, and that be weird to us. For us to get angry when fellow Christians belittled a waitress and that not to be “expected” when they give less than stellar service.

I could go on. But the bottom line is, the way I began to feel to be called to live out my faith didn't work in that setting. The non-negotiables of what we want our lives to look like didn't align with the non-negotiables of the traditional church. My idea of holiness isn't the same as that of the traditional church. That's not to say one is better, or one is right and one is wrong.

I think the main thing people need to know is, we're not petitioning against that type of congregation. We just don't feel we belong there any longer. Maybe forever. We're outcasts in that society. And that's okay.

Where we're at it . . . it's okay to fail. It's okay to be wrong. It's okay to go full in to an idea that may not work. But we know it would be a violation of our calling to shy away from the challenge of living a different life and reaching a different group.

For so long, we were told we were innovators and revolutionaries, and that our place was in the traditional setting of church, as a change agent. As a catalyst to a revolution. For years in my church, and as my first professional career, my role was that of a rising leader. I was given that task of taking the church in to the next generation, figuring out how to reach people like me. Then when I came up with new ideas, they were shot down before I even had time to think through them fully.

I was lead to believe my voice could make a difference. It didn't. And that was a harsh reality to face. I could name many names off the top of my head who fell victim to such a promise. Any maybe we're young, immature, and impatient, but you can only be snuffed out so many times before you give up.

It was a sad day the day I realized I wasn't a change agent at all. I was a quota that was being met. I was "one of the young people." The figurehead innovators. I served no real purpose other than to make the large Christian organization I worked for look like they were young and hip. With a finger on culture. Up and coming. Doing everything it took to reach the next generation.

We're thankful for the community of journeyers we've linked up with. We're hopeful because of friends like you. Those of you who blog and those who don't. Those of you who wrestle with these issues with us. Who have our back at all times. You are our lifeline. You keep us grounded. And we thank you for that.

I'm proud to be on the outside.



Tank

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Andrew, also known as Tank (which strangely reminds me of the glory days of American Gladiators), lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He blogs as a part of a collective known as atypicalspirituality.com with two of his good friends. His blogging "portal" can be found here. Tank is a newlywed, has a really big dog, and is an assistant manager at QuikTrip. They are active in shaping and creating a faith community outside the box of the traditional model.



I left the church this last May. It was one of the hardest and easiest decisions of my life. I don't really want to go into it here because I have not recovered from the experience. I have been working for/volunteering for churches since I was 16 in some capacity, and that has continued to this very day. Although I have walked away from the 'Traditional Model' of church, I have not lost all hope for the Church yet, and am currently involved in a community. I was raised from the age of 2 till 15 in a charismatic evangelical mega-church of 10,000+ people, My next church I found when I was 16 in a small town about 45 minutes away from the city I live in which was a 500 member Methodist Church. I went to a charismatic evangelical high school for my last two years of schooling and attended Oral Roberts University for three years of higher education. I have yet to finish my degree because it is in Youth Ministry and I don't know if I will ever do that again. My last church stop was a 350 member Disciples of Christ church where I served as Youth Intern and finally Youth Pastor before I decided to leave. I think that is enough of the bio.

Some Reasons I left the Church Are:

Community. You know Jesus had many people following him that wanted to be his disciples. Yeah, it's true, but Jesus said some hard things and did some things that got people mad at him, and many of those people decided they were out of there. All except twelve people who were committed. We're they perfect? Far from it. We're they smart? Probably not all of them. We're they the most loved? Heck no. But they were committed to following Jesus around and trying to be like him. They screwed up a-lot, but they were committed. Here is what gets me, I have never walked into a church that looks even remotely like this. Every

church I walk into is trying to please as many people as possible so that their church can get bigger and bigger. Most of the people don't know each other, and I mean really know each other. And the second someone screws up and says something wrong they are out of there. Why are they out of there? Because the church isn't focused on community and commitment to one another, they are too busy growing. I want to be part of a small community of people that are committed to each other and to god. I don't find this in the modern church.

I know that a small community that isn't connected to a larger group may come up with a different 'belief' than other small groups and I think that is ok.

Absolute Truth. I think there is absolute truth. I just don't think that we could ever have more than a small grasp of what that truth is. It is funny to talk to people who say there is no absolute truth, just ask them if murder is bad. Murder is bad in all circumstances, even if you are killing the most evil person in the world, they still have people who love or loved them and vice-versa, and even if you want to argue that they love no one and no one loves them, you can't forget that God loves them.

What frustrates me is that most churches I attend have this idea that they have it all figured out and they must get this message to all people so that they too can have all the truth in their possession. This is the why sermons are so important so that we can all get the truth delivered to us and we can all be on the same page together. There is no room for discussion, everything is the way it is and there is no way around it. I mean didn't god write down all of his thoughts through some people way back in history for us to have all knowledge and all power? I don't think that is how it happened, I don't even think that is close. I want to be part of a community that is wrestling toward being more like God and bringing his kingdom to this earth even though we know we don't have it all figured out. I want to be a part of a community that keeps me accountable from a group of people, not from an all knowing person who stands at the front of the church. I want to be able to doubt and not be labeled a heretic.

Hope. I don't find much hope in the modern church. Of course if your definition of hope is a large crowd of people who are generally happy and comfortable, then there is a ton of hope in the modern church. But hope for me is that we are going to make the world a better place for my generation and those to come. When I walk into a church I don't feel like we are making any sort of real impact on social change, environmental issues, etc. I want a community that is more focused on changing the world, than on being right.

These are all big reasons, and only a few that I have left the church, but there are some much more personal reasons as well.

1. I never once felt like my personal spiritual life or my wife's was as important as the people I was supposed to be ministering to. If you as a pastor want me to work for you, put my spiritual life above the people you want me to affect. If I am not doing well, then the chances are that the people I am in charge of will not do well either.

2. I never once felt like the staff I was part of was a community. We had many of the same struggles, but for some reason we ran the church like a business where feelings and emotions take a back seat to numbers and productivity.

3. I didn't feel like my beliefs about what good ministry was were important. I think that my

relationships are more important than what was being learned each week.

In all honesty I wrote this post in a very short amount of time, on little sleep. On top of all that, I don't have words for my feelings about the church yet. I have been hurt, and deeply hurt at that. I hope that someone may benefit from my words, but that no one will take them as absolute facts that need to be analyzed under a microscope. I am simply a man who is lost and doubting looking for a place of rest where I can be safe. I think what my generation is looking for most is safety to be who we honestly are, flaws and all. We want acceptance and validation. We want hope that there is something better out there than what we currently see.



Jessica

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Jessica lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She is married to Tank and she is part owner of a big black dog. She video blogs on their marriage which you can find by checking out her wicked cool blog. It seems that she might have a mild to moderate infatuation with Sufjan's music and has an aversion to lottery tickets. Jessica has worked as a staff member of a church as a children's pastor. But no longer does so.



Up until recently, my whole life has revolved around the church going, working and volunteering for the church.

My name is Jessica Tankersley and I grew up in a conservative-christian-homeschooled family of 7, in a de-secularized and most often judgmental environment.... located in the heart the bible belt.

My whole childhood and into my teens years I believed whole heartedly in the theology passed down to me from my evangelical, charismatic parents and from the teachers of my spirit filled Assemblies of God church, (let your imagination run wild as to what this could entail, because it was just as crazy as you could probably imagine). It was at that church that my parents met, I was raised and baptized. It was also my extended family, and that was a beautiful thing.

In high school my mother suffered from 3 miscarriages, in a row, (in addition to 2 other miscarries she had experienced in between previous children). This sent her into a downward spiral going nowhere.

Eventually she was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. I have two brothers who have always been a little "different". My mom's depression and mania elevated those "different" qualities. One brother was diagnosed with Anxiety Disorder, the worst his doctor had ever seen, and another brother was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or OCD. Finding the "right dose and the right kind" of medication for my mother and brothers was hell. That process took over two years, and those years were the worst time of my life.

During that time our church “family” turned their backs on us. Where we come from depression and anxiety are matters of the heart and can be cured if you pray enough. Obviously that approach wasn’t working for my family.

The church’s response to my family left me feeling alone and un-loved ... this feeling fueled feelings of resentment for everyone at the church. I took it all out on my poor youth pastor. I was cynical about his ministry, hateful to his ideas and theology, and judgmental to his character.

I eventually quit going. My family followed.

My senior year of high school I started going to a youth group of the finest sorts. And the love and acceptance of the people there changed my heart. During the first months of attending I cried in every service for all my misconceptions and judgments over the past few years and all the people I had hurt along the way. However, my “core” beliefs were still very much the same, rooted in the absolute truths I held so dearly. I knew life and religion in two colors, black and white.

Eventually the relationships I made at that youth group would change everything about my beliefs. Long story short, my black and white theology turned to gray, then to colors, and it was the most beautiful and restorative experience of my life. I ripped through McLaren’s trilogy like a bag of chocolate M&M’s and I saw God, Christianity and life in a whole new way. I was finally free. Free to be me.

After I graduated I started volunteering at the same youth group that changed my life. I met some amazing people, including a boy named Tank. Eventually we got married.

We started working for a church, he as the youth pastor, and eventually I joined the staff as the children’s pastor. It was a church of about 500.

During that time I realized that the things in church that made me so content before, no longer made the cut.

Sermons sounded like regurgitated bull shit.

Good musicians, powerful worship, and perfect media shout timing didn’t matter.

The demand for quality, the building, the lights, and all the costumes, (don’t know what I mean? See Josh’s post entitled, “The Exodus: An Auxiliary Illustration”) made me queasy.

After soaking in church culture with my new perspective I struggled with the realization of the big and beautiful Sunday morning show called church. I also began to see that the bigger and better the show, the more “offering” people gave, and the more offering they gave the bigger and better the pastor’s paycheck became.

I don’t care what anyone says, it was all about the Benjamin’s. Or should I say the Cleveland’s? At the church we worked at the pastor banked in over \$80,000 dollars a year. Which, by the way, was over twice as much as the next highest paid staff member at the same

church.

I began to think about the teachings of Jesus and compare them with the churches I had been a part of, and the church in general, (whatever that means), I couldn't see how the two fit together.

Here are some reasons why ... from my personal experience ...

I don't see the politics of Jesus behind a budget that allocates monies galore for the new building project but leaves petty pocket change for the widows and orphans outreach.

I don't see the grace of Jesus behind a pastor who get's upset at his overworked and under-paid worship pastor for misspelling a word on the worship lyrics slide.

I don't see the justice of Jesus behind a church that weighs sins on a scale, calling some worse than others and then shuns those "dirty" sinners from the church.

I don't see the love of Jesus behind a church that locks it kids up in a shoddy little room upstairs so they can't be seen or heard.

And that's the just beginning... I have plenty more frustrations with the church.

I don't believe in being a cynic without alternatives. I hold plenty of new possibilities and new ideas for the church close to my heart.

Anyways, this blog has become way too long and who knows if it evens has anything to do with my generation not "fitting in", but it's why I don't fit, actually it's why I don't want to fit in.

Eventually Andrew and I could not take working and pouring our lives into something that's priorities and ideals were something we could never honestly defend. So we resigned.

We left the church on good terms, and they were sad to see us go.

But, just because I don't fit it doesn't mean I quit entirely.

Even before we quit our jobs working for that church Andrew and I started attending a Saturday evening church service because of the amazing people there. We are there now.

I consider it an alternative to the modern church because in addition to amazing relationships, "Saturday Night", (the name of the church service), strives for authentic community, conversations versus sermons, art, lot's of beautiful art, and a meaningful role in social justice, here and abroad. My favorite part about this service is the bar afterwards, no there isn't a bar in the church, many of us go out to celebrate life afterwards, and it's most often the best times of my week! The service averages about 70 people a week, and we sit around tables, it's awesome!

Something else that makes Saturday Night different than the other churches I have been apart of, (with the exception of my senior year youth group), is the fact that the people I DO CHURCH WITH I also DO LIFE WITH, and that's pretty huge to me.

...And when I say DO CHURCH I mean it, we are the ones that started the service, we are the ones that set it up and tear it down every week, and we are the ones that sing and draw and sculpt during the service.

...And when I say DO LIFE I mean it, we are the ones that struggle along side each other through life's crap, and we are the ones that celebrate with each other through life's goodness no matter the time and place, (but my favorite place is McNellies Pub downtown because hey have good cheap beer).

The poem by Calvin Miller, "My Easy Christ Has Left The Church", ([read it here](#)), is easy for me to relate to as someone who has "left the church". It also forces me to see how I have myself acted in ways that would make Christ want to jump out of the pew and run away. I leave you with an excerpt:

"My easy Christ has left the church, abandoning his all-star role in Easter pageants to live incognito in a patchwork culture, weeping for all those people who cannot afford the pageant tickets."



D10

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d10 is a not a gang name, nor is he a rapper. It's a ghost name for one of the most crazy smart guys I know. They've worked as worship leaders and in youth ministry in churches ranging from a small southern baptist church, to the large 'first baptist church', to 'a huge megachurch in Alpharetta. d10 is the somewhat defacto leader for a house church in northeast Atlanta. He plays a mean violin (not sure about a fiddle) and is a PHD candiate in really smart engineering stuff that I can't explain. I asked d10 specifically to be the last guest blogger of the week and to conclude our series because I have so much respect for his posture of faithfully exploring alternative faith communities instead of sitting on the sidelines complaining like me. He's generous, hopeful, and the only person who had a better beard than mine. Ladies and gentleman, I introduce to you the d10.



I think the D10 take on this is going to be a little different than the previous entries. Even as I start to write this, my heart is heavy. I made a rule with myself that I wouldn't read the other posts until I wrote my own first, but I just broke down and read all of them and the ensuing discussion, and now I'm processing where to begin my own thoughts. Reading all that just made me sad and a little teary.

I, too, haven't been to a "church service" for months. But for the past year I haven't gone more than days without gathering in a relational faith community where "church" has happened. Our housechurch was started in October of 2005, and it wasn't born out of a negative reaction to traditional church forms, but out of a deep seeking of a new expression of the body of Christ. Honestly, it was something we couldn't help but do.

I have to say that I'm not bitter about the traditional church. Lady D10 and I left on some of the best of possible terms, where the leadership took us at our word when we told them God put it in our heart to start a housechurch. They didn't criticize us, but rather asked us how they could support us as we stepped out to where God was leading us. That still amazes me considering how opposite our current approach is from the one we stepped out of. That's not to say we don't have some baggage, but honestly who doesn't? Moreover, I hope for

a better and better relationship with those still in the traditional model. Otherwise we aren't participating in the 'capital C' Church and I fear we'd miss out on so much. Truthfully, a lot of us have been pretty ecumenical when it comes to orthodoxy [right thinking] for quite some time, but I think we have some ecumenical "catching up" to do when it comes to orthopraxy [right practice].

I don't believe housechurch is the only way to do church and be biblical. Some of you might wonder if that's how I felt if I didn't say that. There are some housechurches more biblical than some traditional churches, and some traditional churches more biblical or missional than some housechurches. I just happen to believe that the housechurch framework provides more flexibility and opportunity for the things I see as the bottom line essentials of following Jesus Christ. So to answer Josh's question, I'm going to try to lay out a limited framework of what we're doing now, and I think this will adequately answer the question of why we transitioned to something new. I'm going to try to point out the advantages of our current approach instead of pointing out the disadvantages of the traditional churches we shifted out of. I assume those negatives won't really need to be explicitly pointed out anyway. Alright, let's get to it.

GOD IS INTERACTIVE We believe God is real and listening, and we also believe that He speaks to us... in a lot of ways. Because of that, we structure our gatherings in a way that wholeheartedly embraces that. Instead of spending hours talking about Him, we talk to Him and try to listen to Him. Not having an agenda, order of service, or other time constraints make this very possible in our setting. So because we try to follow God in our meetings, no two meetings are very similar. Some are very confessional. Some are celebratory. Some are reflective. We aim to create as much space for 'real life' as possible by keeping the scripting to a minimum. They're always unpredictable and genuine, full of life and reality.

THE BODY OF CHRIST The notion of the body of Christ defines our community. Not more central than Christ, of course. The point here is that we believe everyone has equal access to God and that in the New Testament we see churches led by the plurality of the group instead of a central leader. Some people call this the "priesthood of believers," but the bottom line is that every member of the community is recognized as a unique expression of Christ and as such, is completely critical to the life of the body. Nobody is marginalized and forced to just listen. See 1 Cor 14 for more of an idea - "everyone has a hymn, a teaching, ..."

So in our faith community, we don't look to a single person as responsible for the spiritual teaching of the community. Instead, imagine ten people coming together, having been wrestling with applying the Bible and belief to life all week, sharing the net of their experiences with that and urging everybody on toward deeper missional living. I believe 10 people digging deep is much more grounded than one person doing the work for everybody.

All of us own the community. All of us own each other's spiritual health. All of us own our orthodoxy/theology. All of us depend on each other to press toward Christlikeness. All of us hurt when one hurts, and all of us rejoice when one rejoices. Maybe it sounds cliché, but that's really how it is.

SHIFT FROM THEORETICAL TO APPLIED In our community, we work so hard to operate at the point where real life and faith intersect. Therefore it undeniably comes down to honesty. So we have created an atmosphere where the 'language of churchianity' feels very odd or

foreign. Instead, if you come to one of our gatherings, you will hear things that would sound very out of place in a Sunday School environment. People confess shocking things in safety.

We believe we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds like it says in Romans 12:2. But we recognize this is more like erosion of the heart than an instantaneous event, so we affirm the role of the humble journey and small steps toward Christlikeness. We are sick of perpetuating a defeating guilt-trip over not being perfect in our devotion or praxy, and instead embrace the process and the inherent struggles (if we're honest) that we experience therein.

This mentality says that we aren't going to gloss over the hard things. Things like struggling with sin, loving people we don't like, acknowledging doubt, facing fears, working through depression, embracing humility, becoming last. Not that we've attained these things, but our approach allows us to at least face them head on honestly in a safe environment.

MONEY TO FEED, CLOTHE, AND SEND Jesus taught us that when we feed the hungry, give to the poor, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, care for the sick, and visit those in prison, we are ministering specifically to Him in those moments. And have you ever thought how sort of odd it is that James tells us that pure and undefiled religion consists in taking care of orphans and widows?

We responded to this by deciding that all of the money given would be in turn given away. We intentionally seek ways to support ourselves so we're not a burden on the church and more money can be given to meet felt needs in the community and world. Even with just 10 or so people, it's amazing to us how far money stretches when you take out all the perpetual bills a lot of churches maintain.

Here's an idea of where our money goes: We are responsible for a Mercy Home in India. We buy webcams and mail them into the Middle East to facilitate the meeting of persecuted believers over the internet via video chat. We pay the bus fare for a kid in Romania so he can travel back and forth to school every day for an education that will allow him to break the poverty cycle. We've bought industrial dryers for shelters for women and kids who are victims of domestic violence. We give to random needs as we become aware of them. We support those in our midst who travel to incarnate the mission of Christ in the far places of the world, like Niger, Kenya, India, and the Middle East, to name a few.

THE SHARED LIFE When I read Acts, what I see is a group of people whose lives are so intertwined that they literally have "everything in common." They broke bread together daily. The life of the church community was rooted in the daily interactions and not the weekly gathering. The latter was essential but the former shaped the substance of it.

This happens on Thursday nights at dinner around our table. It happens during the week when we meet for lunch. It happens on weekends when we share in all kinds of things, from ministry to hanging out. So in everything, we strive to keep relationships center.

It's messy and gritty a lot of the time. We get overwhelmed, tired, confused, discouraged, you name it. But we see ourselves more as family than friends, knit together deeply in a way that compels us to move forward in forgiveness and grace, into deeper community and connectedness.

IN CONCLUSION So to the traditional pastor who reads this, everything I said above is part of what we shifted out of the traditional model to experience in a more deliberate way. Every single thing I mentioned could be accomplished in a traditional setting, but for us, the purest and most complete expression emerged when we stepped out into a more unconventional form.

At the end of the day, this new approach is propelling me to deeper places in my faith like I've never experienced before, and for that I give God glory.

If you've read this far and are interested in some other posts I've written along these lines, hop over to FiniteThis.com and check out either "Community and My Glorious", "From Stage to Sofa: A Memoir", or my "Open Letter".

peace of Christ - d10



For a link to the original copies of these stories
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