

Guest editorial: Why people are not leaving your church

February 19, 2015

The Internet is full of articles about why people are leaving church—or never attending church in the first place. Some are called “nones,” and many people use the term “dones” for those who are finished with church—at least for now.



George BullardA great deal of focus is on the generation known as Millennials. This fits the pattern that every few years, church leaders, prognosticators and the parents of young adults express concern young adults are not as active in church as others think they ought to be.

On the other hand, I wonder why people are *not* leaving church. Why do people stay in their church, even when it is not serving them well and not helping them connect with the Triune God?

As I began pondering this question, I realized I had a few ideas about this, but not broad perspective. I decided to ask people in my network for help. I sent out a first-round survey asking participants to tell me the reasons they believe people do not leave their church.

I asked two questions. First: What are some healthy, positive reasons

people are not leaving your church? Second: What are some unhealthy, negative reasons people are not leaving your church?

I heard from four-dozen people. They provided interesting insights.

From the responses, I came up with the top 10 positive and top 10 negative reasons people are not leaving church. I sent out a second survey and asked people to prioritize the top positive and negative reasons. This time, I heard from almost seven-dozen people. The result was the top 10 healthy, positive reasons in perceived priority order and the same for the top 10 unhealthy, negative reasons.

Let's be clear. I do not claim this is true scientific research. It is a beginning. It is the start of a conversation. It may actually be more hard data than many prognosticators have when they express an opinion on a subject.

Enough background stuff. What did I discover? Here are the top four positive and the top four negative reasons:

Healthy, positive reasons people are *not* leaving your church

- The top positive, healthy reason by far is **relationships**.

People who have deep, strong, long-term relationships that exhibit openness and acceptance within the church are not leaving your church. This is home to them. They want to be a continual part of this church. They are unlikely to consider going anywhere else because of the depth of the relationships they have in your church.

- Second, when there is high-quality, exceptional **preaching and teaching** in the church, people want to continue to be a part.
- This is coupled with the third reason. When there is genuine, exciting, engaging and uplifting **worship**, people want to continue being a part

of your church.

- Fourth is a strong sense of community, love and unity. Obviously, this complements the top priority of **relationships**. I suspect the difference is relationships are about a person's close network, and community is about the overall sense of the congregation.

Unhealthy, negative reasons people are *not* leaving your church

- The top negative, unhealthy reason is **comfort**.

This was significantly higher than any other answer. When people have been in a church most of or all their lives, they are afraid to leave this comfort zone. It is not that they do not want to go anywhere else. They are afraid to leave where they are comfortable.

- Second, people have a part in **controlling** this church. A lot of things in their life are beyond their control, but at church, they can control things. They may even be seen as a matriarch or patriarch within the church. They cannot be sure they could control their next church.

- Third is personal **complacency**. Beyond being comfortable, they have no motivation to go anywhere else. They can participate in the church passively, hide in the fellowship and feel they fit.

- Fourth is **low expectations** from their church. It is easy to be a member of their church. The church is complacent and does not place many expectations on them. For example, their church never confronts people individually with the need to grow spiritually. Why leave?

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Global distributed his column.