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Belonging to the Body: Changing Perspectives of Church Attendance and Membership

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Belonging to the Body: Changing Perspectives of Church Attendance and Membership

Abstract

"God has always gathered believers together, and will continue to do so, even though our understanding of what 'gathered' means may change."

Posting about how church fellowship and community are changing from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/belonging-to-the-body-changing-perspectives-of-church-attendance-and-membership/>

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Belonging to the Body: Changing Perspectives of Church Attendance and Membership

Todd Zuidema

March 15, 2022

We live in a culture where more and more people are giving up on church, giving up on organized religion, and for some, ultimately giving up on Jesus. In 2019, a Barna study noted that in their polling, 64% of young adults between the ages of 18-29 have left the church.¹ This was pre-pandemic. In the past two years, that percentage has likely grown.

Back in the 1980's and 1990's, I remember Bill Hybels from Willow Creek Church saying, "The local church is the hope of the world!" Thirty years later, many prominent church leaders, Hybels included, have been discredited due to a variety of abuses of power. There has been an exodus from megachurch ministries as well as from churches of all sizes. Many of those who have left likely feel more like they have escaped disaster, rather than delivered into any type of promised land. Others have just drifted away and disappeared.

Congregations have been hard on pastors as well. It has been noted that there have been many pastors leaving ministry altogether. Theological controversies, disputes over social issues, dissension over politics, and the inability to respond graciously to each other during the pandemic has led many pastors to become disillusioned and weary. In a recent podcast, Skye Jethani reflected on a conversation with a friend who had left the ministry. In seeing all the infighting that was occurring in his church, he confessed that he didn't know that he could recommend his church to those curious about faith. "I was worried that their lives would be worse if they came to my church."²

Also, we enter into our third year of a global pandemic. In the U.S., most churches ceased meeting in person for at least 8-10 weeks beginning in March of 2020. Since then, there has been no uniform response. Depending on where you live, you might see people gathering as they would have pre-pandemic. Other churches have still not met in person. Some churches require masks and physical distancing; other churches simply have refrained from passing the collection plate and have a place to drop your offering as you leave the church. Each congregation developed their own practices, and for many, these decisions have not come without controversy or arguments.

All this paints a bleak picture of the church as we have known it—but not all is lost. As Aaron Baart, Dean of Chapel and Chief of Staff at Dordt University, once wrote on this blog, "Before

you slump further into your recliner or despair at these findings, be reminded by a faith that has always pointed to death before a resurrection.”³

One development that has shown growth is that almost all churches have beefed up their ability to broadcast their services online. When churches stopped meeting in early spring of 2020, the church I was serving at the time put up a camera on a tripod. The service, which included some music and a sermon, was usually recorded on a Saturday afternoon, lightly edited, and then uploaded for a delayed release on YouTube. Only a few short weeks later, our church had completely grown its digital proficiency with new cameras and improved recording capability.

This development has made worship more accessible for those who haven't been able to get to church. For those who deal with physical limitations or wrestle with issues related to mental health, the opportunity to worship online has been a blessing. There have been challenges also. There are others, for whom in person worship is a viable option that contains little risk or discomfort, who haven't come back. They watch from the comfort of home. Some have found a church online and now consider it “their” church, even though it may physically meet several time zones away.

All this has led some to wonder if online services have served their purpose and should cease. The desire is to encourage people to gather—embodied and present with each other as believers have done for centuries. In an opinion piece in the New York Times, Tish Harrison Warren strongly advocated for the ending of online services, calling embodied worship a countercultural analog response to an increasingly digital world.⁴

Others are seeing a new paradigm about how believers can be in community with each other and develop meaningful relationships online. They continue to develop their digital ministries and are working on new ways to minister to their existing congregations, while also evangelistically engaging with those who have never heard the Gospel. I recently attended a conference where a speaker shared that he was aware of someone who had started a virtual church on Roblox, an online multiplayer gaming platform. He shared that this church had over a thousand members, regular worship services, an organized small-groups program, and a staff to help with day-to-day ministry.

Throughout history, God has always called people to gather for worship. Worship was and always has been a mix of personal devotion and piety, as well as regularly meeting together corporately in a worshipping congregation of people. I believe that the church will continue to gather, but the gathering may increasingly be a mix of people who are present physically and also virtually. The challenge will be as it always has been: learning how to best lead and encourage people to deepen in faith and to live out that faith in all areas of life. The church will have to continue to learn new ways how to disciple, foster accountability, and empower people to live grateful lives of service.

The Canons of Dort, not often considered a source of spiritual inspiration, reminds us that God will never let His Church perish. “...There is always a church of believers founded on Christ’s blood, a church which steadfastly loves, persistently worships, and—here and in all eternity—praises him as her Savior who laid down his life for her on the cross, as a bridegroom for a bride.”⁵

As I enter into my sixth decade of life, I become more and more convinced that living and remaining in faith is a miracle, truly a gift from God. As I reflect on my own faith, I have had my share of doubts and unanswered questions over the years, but at the end of the day, I keep coming back to Jesus—or, maybe more accurately, he keeps coming back for me. He calls me into community with generations of believers who walk this same journey of faith. God has always gathered believers together, and will continue to do so, even though our understanding of what “gathered” means may change. This gathering will extend into the new Creation.

As we wait, the words of Paul to the Corinthians could never be more timely. “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”⁶

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1. <https://www.barna.com/research/resilient-disciples/>
 2. <https://www.holypost.com/holy-post-podcast/episode/200a1ca4/episode-489-the-evangelical-empire-strikes-back-and-barna-briefs-with-david-kinnaman>
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 4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/opinion/church-online-services-covid.html?smid=url-share>
 5. Canons of Dort, The Second Main Point of Doctrine, Article 9
 6. 1 Corinthians 13:12 (NIV)