
Subject: Chapter 3: The 'Out-of-Church' Christians.

Dear Saints

Below please find Chapter 3 of Andrew Strom's book: The 'Out-of-Church' Christians. Please visit his web-site at <http://www.streetrevival.com/>. His e-mail is prophetic@revivalschool.com. You can also subscribe to their newsletter by sending an empty e-mail to anzac-subscribe@welovegod.org.

Once again, I would like to extend an invitation to mail me if you have any personal experience of this, or when the Lord speaks to you on this issue. Many have already mailed me, and the collective phenomenon is getting increasingly more interesting!

Enjoy!

Eben Swart

CHAPTER THREE WHY ARE THEY LEAVING?

"It is nevertheless my contention that the number of leavers from evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic churches is much larger than previously anticipated and that the rate of leave-taking is increasing."
-Pastor Alan Jamieson, author of 'A Churchless Faith'.

There have been a number of publications that have referred to this "Out-of-church" phenomenon in recent years. As Christian pollster George Barna wrote in Re-Churching the Unchurched: "Relatively few unchurched people are atheists. Most of them call themselves Christian and have had a serious dose of church life in the past." And the author of the World Christian Encyclopedia, David Barrett, estimates that there are around 112 million "churchless Christians" worldwide - about 5 percent of all adherents. He projects that this number will double by 2025.

New Zealand pastor Alan Jamieson, author of A Churchless Faith, has been studying this phenomenon for some years. To his surprise he found that far from being nominal churchgoers, 94% of the 'out-of-church' Christians he interviewed had been leaders of some kind - such as deacons, elders or Sunday school teachers - and 40% had been full-time Christian workers. He also found that for many the break came not because they had lost their faith, but more because they wanted to save it.

Sadly, Jamieson says that many churches seem unaware - and unconcerned - about those who have departed their ranks. The vast majority of leavers that he interviewed told him that no-one from their church had ever discussed with them why they had left.

I myself have discovered that there are a wide variety of reasons for people leaving, and a wide variety of situations that they find themselves in today. Some have joined the ranks of the new house-church or cell-church networks that are rising up all over the world. Many more, however, are opting for a more spontaneous or non-structured form of Christianity. Some have even left regular Christian fellowship altogether. For them this truly is a 'wilderness' experience - alone with God. I am sure you will recognise these various experiences in the emails below.

What I want to do in this book, is spend a number of chapters looking at the reasons why these people are leaving. After that, I want to look at the validity of what they are doing, and finally what it would take for them to become involved with the wider Body again.

Even though some of the things that these people say about the church could be classed as "negative", I believe it is absolutely vital that we hear from them at this time. Because what they are saying is representative of thousands of people who are deserting our churches in their droves right now. And we need to take urgent notice of their reasons for doing so. We might not like what they are saying, but we really do need to listen - for our own benefit as well as theirs.

Let's start by hearing from several leaders who have left behind the normal format of "church" to become involved with 'house-church' - an extremely fast-growing trend around the world right now:

From: Ron (-New Zealand):

I have been a pastor for several years and have seen and experienced many of the deficiencies in today's church. I saw many people who lived in mediocrity, trying to fit God into their lives instead of trying to fit their lives into God. While there are many good people in church and good churches, I too had been left feeling there had to be more.

What God started to reveal to me was that there is not one way to have church. Since becoming a Christian 17 years ago I have only known the "community church" way of having church. What I have subsequently come to learn is something Larry Kreider, International director of Dove Ministries explains well - there are emerging different models of church.

The traditional model has been the "community church" where the pastor leads the church, the church runs various programmes and meets in a community building. This is like your local 4-square or New World supermarket.

Also emerging in the last 20 years is the "mega-church model". This has co-incided with the introduction of WalMart in the USA, The Warehouse in New Zealand, where people travel for miles to go to a big, impressive "one stop" shop.

However, more interestingly is the emergence of micro-church networks. These are small group churches, house churches or similar, networking together for support, vision and accountability. These networks have sprung up all over the world, mostly under the direction of the Holy Spirit (not an imported model!) The small groups are more intimate, relational, real and made up of people who live counter-culturally. Outreach is relational and very effective. These groups rather than growing larger keep multiplying and planting more churches that become part of the network.

This is a phenomenon that has really only come to prominence in the last 3-5 years. It appeals particularly to generation X and Y'ers because of its strong relational element.

From: Sam (-Canada):

I was on staff in a Vineyard church, and I resigned in 1999 after an intimate encounter with the Lord through reading the word of God and Tommy Tenney's GOD CHASERS. I resigned a week after my last sermon. I could not play the game anymore.

I discovered that my mechanic, an elder at a local Pentecostal church and a friend of 17 years had opted out as well, and he was meeting with Christians in homes and their commitment to the Lord did not diminish. In fact it grew!

I discovered another group of people who had walked away from the system. They had essentially become a community. Some still lived in their homes, but some had sold theirs and then pooled their resources and bought a larger house so they could all live together. And they have been together since 1968.

I discovered other believers who would gather at Tim Hortons, our version of Starbucks, a coffee shop, and would talk and pray and encourage each other. I discovered too that in some of our larger malls, Christians were gathering there on Sunday mornings to walk with other people and exercise and then have a time of fellowship and share needs and what the Lord was doing in their lives.

All these and more testified to opting out of the system and a desire for authentic Christianity. They and myself have given up on the religious system that is presumed to be authentic, but we see the church as the people of God, and not the trappings of ministry, buildings, tithes and offerings, and program after program. We want nothing to do with that stuff.

I started hanging out with others who were just as disappointed as I was. We just got together, and we ate and hung out and we fellowshiped. We brought our kids, and we played games and celebrated life. We worshipped and shared the word, we helped each other out, and cared for some obvious needs in each others lives and did some mercy ministry and outreach in the city. After a year of this, in November of 2000, I asked everybody (18 of us) that we should seek the Lord about becoming an organized church. We fasted and prayed for a month. We then gathered and talked about what we thought the Lord was saying. Oddly enough, it was this: "Keep doing what you are doing, for this is why I have called you out and gathered you together. You already are the church and you are becoming more and more the people I desire you to be."

This staggered me. I was ready to plant a cell church, and here, the Lord was already telling us that we were the church He wanted us to be! Needless to say, we have pressed on and continued in this journey. We have become obsessed with the Lord and intimate with Him and we have developed much stronger relationships with the Lord and each other, and we understand more fully all the "one another" passages in the NT, and especially the "love one another" passages. I am amazed at what has happened. I would never go back to what I knew before. Never.

I am now networking with others, and have found that there are over a dozen such house churches in my twin cities, and there are more springing up all the time. I have discovered fellow Vineyard pastors have now transitioned three of their churches to house church networks. There are networks who are discovering new ways of expressing the life of Jesus and His ministries in a variety of wineskins... we believe that this is a definite new paradigm of church life being unleashed in North America.

From: Kristine (-USA):

So how did "house church" happen for me? Well, a couple of years ago my small "prophetic group" that was meeting under a larger church stayed together and became a house church. And then much to our delight, we found out about 15 more house churches during a "house church gathering" that was at a home. Many of us have interconnected and go to each other's house church for various teachings, intercession nights, or just "get together, eat and enjoy each other night". Our house church has also connected with a house church that feeds the homeless every Sunday at a local park (which was very difficult for me to get used to since we were actually doing what Jesus said to do, "Feed the poor"). And now we do Sunday "church" in a park. It's not about "US" anymore.... it's about "THEM!"

From: Zack & Patty (-USA):

As for us, we could not play church any more. The church we belonged to was supposed to be a five-fold-ministry church where people were to be equipped so they could do what God was calling them to do. As it turned out, it became a works church with programs, liturgy and control. Our former Pastor micro-managed all aspects of the church. From worship to retreats.

My husband was the worship leader. The micro-managing got so bad that he was told how to do worship. God and the leading of the Holy Spirit were totally removed from the picture. He finally couldn't handle it any longer. He had to choose God!! He had to quit... and do what God was calling him to do... worship Him in freedom! As for me, I was a church leader in women's ministry and a deaconess.

Since we have quit the church we have been called rebellious, dead wood, and we have been accused of having the spirit of Jezebel. Sad, isn't it... All we wanted was Jesus and for Him to be lifted up!

After we quit the church we had people who wanted to worship and enjoy God's presence through the gift God has given my husband. So God has developed a home worship and praise group which I have nick-named The Acts II Gang. Each time we meet, someone gets healed or is ministered to by God and the power of His Holy Spirit. We currently have had 10 to 15 people attending.

This is what God has called my husband to do... Lead Worship to the place where people come to a greater understanding of God's love and to experience God's marvelous touch. So sad to think that if this had been allowed, this same kind of ministry could have happened in our former church.

We want to be part of God's movement... We want to lift up His church... not man's agenda church... We want to see Jesus lifted up and people coming to know Him in a real way...

Quite aside from those who are departing from conventional churches to hold meetings in their homes, there are large numbers of Christians who are simply opting out altogether. For some it is because of one particularly bad experience in church - or sometimes a whole series of bad experiences:

From: Bob (-USA):

The church across the street, a Church of Christ, is holding revival meetings through the weekend. Our front porch sets up high overlooking the street. Kay and I sat watching as they gathered. Some might look up, few, if any will speak, though we have tried.

It's been a while for us, so long since "going to church". This evening, as we sat out there remembering those days, it may have been, say, at least fifteen years from the last one, beginning from the mid 70's in a Nazarene Church. We wondered about those we knew back then, wondering how they might be today, successful remembering some names, associating others with certain events, memories fading or lost. We were involved heavily in their activities, though never "card carrying" members. They brought us in and truly loved us, I believe. Both Kay and I agreed that we missed those friendships with three or four couples who took to us, visiting in each others homes, events planned to include many numbers of church folks. It all seemed good to me, these social relationships.

Our second summer, they appointed me to represent the softball team in the local church league. It was my job to manage the team. I settled my expectations, thinking it would be a cake walk. After all, I was dealing with mostly all Christian men, in it for the exercise and fellowship.... no fierce competitors to face, no nasty attitudes or dispositions. I had seen it all before, participating in city leagues, in army leagues, that win-at-all-cost pressure cooker that sometimes creates hard feelings, and in the extreme, even physical confrontations. Never in a church league!

Phil was a tag-along, always eager to help, to do something. If we were designated as "home-team", it was also my job to see that the field was prepared for playing. Grass cut, base lines chalked, ready to go. None to help me, yet Phil was always there. Back then, he would have been about 19, and somewhat "slow", both physically and mentally challenged, yet, only slightly. Though in the eyes of a few, he might have been "in the way", I knew Phil just wanted a friend and to be one.... and I also knew he wanted to play softball. Boy, my illusions would start to crumble, big time. Phil was no ball player, but what the hey.... it was a church league, folks with big hearts and charitable natures. I would let him play.

Right field would be the place for him. It would be rare that Phil would have to catch anything. Knowing that this particular team had no lefties... I watched as one smart aleck stepped to the plate on the wrong side. His intentions were obvious, knowing Phil's ability to catch anything was about 1 chance in 100 or so. I would kinda hold my breath. It wouldn't help.... Phil missed a routine fly ball, and just a couple of the guys were really mad at me. "Get him out of there!"

"Awww.... come on guys, it's just for fun, it's just a game, let's let him play." One in particular got in my face, threw a bat to the ground.... "I'm here to win, if you're not, then I'm wasting my time".... and off he went, got in his car and drove home. I stood there in shock, hurt, puzzled, confused.... Only Phil came to me. "It's ok Bob, I don't want you to get in trouble, I'll sit down." It broke my heart, it truly did.

Now, I will tell you, this thing happened so many years ago, yet so fresh still because of it's impact, I cannot forget. The "best" is yet to tell. So much at a loss as to what to do and how to handle it, I sought out the "associate pastor", who was there at the game to witness the spectacle..... "Bob, don't worry. If he should quit coming to church, it will be no great loss. He doesn't tithe that much anyway." In an instant, many of my images came tumbling down. How clearly I understood the value of a man. A new building was going up, and my thoughts went back to the previous Sunday morning as the pastor's sermon was on tithing. "I've been looking over the books back there, and some of you are either not making anything or you are robbing God." Now here was the other "preacher" making it very clear..... money.

We watched them this evening going to church.... obvious their kinship, their friendship, their conversation. We sat in silence for a time..... then Kay sadly said, "I miss that." I know her heart, and what she really meant..... and I said, "I do too, babe, I do too."

From: Terrie (-USA):

Several years ago, I also left my own church, weeping uncontrollably because of the grief in my spirit. While the minister stood to preach, women (mostly) wandered up and down

the aisles, and across the front, jerking and making chicken-like movements. The ministers evidently thought it was God. I have never spoken against them, or against anything they were engaged in, as I am just a sheep. But I did not and will not participate. Since then, church splits have taken place and it appears that the leadership has gained at least some discernment. It appears to me that well-meaning, but undiscerning and ignorant sheep are drawn into these things. The Holy Spirit can do some really strange things. I've seen and done some myself while under His influence. But some of this was not God.

Others who have left say they just could not stomach the predictability of the same old "routine" any more. Where was the life? Where was the vitality of Christ? To them, even many of the so-called 'Spirit-filled' churches seemed to be quite dull and predictable. It became harder and harder to force themselves to go along each week:

From: Shawn Marie (-Cayman Islands):

I also am a believer that has been hiding out at home intimately with the Lord, because of so much emptiness, boredom, and frustration in the churches, and I'm talking about Holy Spirit-Filled Churches. I am in the Cayman Islands and I fellowship with believers around the world on the internet. So many are hurting and left hurting by the wayside for lack of spritual food - "starvation"! I do believe that we are on the brink of a whole new spiritual outbursting and explosion and rising up of a whole new strong army of the Lord.

From: Chris & Rick (-USA):

We're NOT "rebellious" or "mavericks" or baby Christians.... We've been saved 20+ years, have a grown son who LOVES Jesus and is a Worship Pastor, were previous "church leaders", and have had a Prison Ministry for 7 years.... We just cannot seem to be able to stomach the "routine" of weekly going to hear the same guy come up with ANOTHER message....

From: Bill & Bonnie (-Canada):

We have been so frustrated with the church for several years. The word is no longer preached, and what is said is the "Spirit of God moving" many times certainly is not. I have prayed and asked the Lord to show us where we can find other believers who are hungry for Jesus too. We have been accused of backsliding and church hopping. We have gone to several churches but have not been able to find one where Jesus is exalted.

Quite a number of those who wrote had seen too many double-standards in the church - preaching one thing and doing another. After awhile it had affected their very desire to be there. They did not want to leave but over time it all got too much:

From: Geralyn (-USA):

I am one of those Christians that is having a hard time finding a church that is acting like the church, in the book of Acts - in the Bible. I am so tired of many Christian Churches being controlled by one person (-Pastor, Priest, Rev., etc). God's idea of the church (ecclesia) is not what is going on in most churches. He wanted all to be equal in importance and using different spiritual gifts to make the Church prosper. He had elders in the church, He had teachers, disciples and apostles. We need to get out of the mindset of going to church and to realize we are to BE the church. We should be a body of believers with specific jobs to bring the gospel to a lost world. Teaching in churches is important. But, there comes a time when we have to do what we are taught. Live what we are taught to do. So many Christians are looking too much like this world and not like children of God. We need to live a life different than everyone else, so non-Christians become hungry for what we have.

From: Douglas (-USA):

Its better to be real with the Lord than go to church and play the holier-than-thou church game everyone seems to play there.... until you meet them out of church in their everyday life and you see how those holier-than-thou's are really living... That is where God wants us... in our real lives not the pretend ones most people feel they must behave like at church... He loves us how we really are.

From: D.D. (-USA):

We were church leaders, pillars of the faith, and prayer warriors and intercessors with 20-30 years of faithfully working within the church... But men seem to be cursed by some kind of turf-war mentality and more concerned with their own empire building of personal ministry than with building the kingdom of God... We came to the sad conclusion after many years that the 'powers that be' at the top of church structure didn't really want a 'church' built after the pattern that God laid out in the Bible at all... but rather something built after the pattern of the business world... Think about it: What if Noah hadn't built the Ark according to the pattern God gave him?... What if Solomon hadn't built the temple according to the pattern God gave David?... Until the 'church' that Jesus died to birth is built according to His pattern, you're going to see more and more sickened and leave a church that is all program-oriented with no 'true' move of God.

From: Mary Jean (-USA):

We have seen it all. From dead, compromising churches to hyped-up phoney churches, telling us that if we just do this or that, the next level will come. And of course, the biggest doctrine of our generation, if you just give more money, all your problems will be solved, or worse, He will heal you, fix your marriage, flood you with lots of money, etc.

From: Michelle (-USA):

I wandered away from the Lord for many years, and just recently found my way back to Him. Or more accurately, He said "Enough!" and I obeyed. I've tried to go back. The last time I went, the pastor was preaching and he had such a spirit of disillusionment that I could hardly stand it. It's as if he couldn't make himself believe it anymore. That's my feeling in general. Church is social time. Time to dress-up and participate in "holy" gossip. The gifts are denied, there's no concern for the true needs of the brethren, and sin is candy-coated...

From: Vicki (-USA):

I left my home church (charismatic, multicultural, North American) eight months ago. I have visited other churches and begged the Holy Spirit to give me guidance as to what to do. I miss the fellowship, the security, and the guidance that a congregation can give to the individual. Recently, I visited my old congregation. I thought perhaps I was to return and nothing but my silly pride was keeping me from doing what G-d wanted me to do. I am tired of being alone and without a spiritual family for emotional support. But I came away with the same old impressions. Leadership wants my tithes, my presence and unquestioning obedience. And most of the Christians want a 'warm and light-hearted' Christianity...

From: Marlene (-New Zealand):

I am one of those 'wilderness' christians you talk about in your email. For me, I am totally convinced that what I am feeling and experiencing is 'of God'. The way it all started for me was: I was asked to join the leadership of a new church a couple of years ago now. I found that I was deeply burdened for the state of the churches at that time. Often in the middle of worship I would be overcome with a spirit of intercession and would weep almost uncontrollably. The feeling was of great sorrow and grief. When asking the Lord for some understanding, the only thing I got was that his presence was grieved. I felt that he had left the church and that we were doing business as usual without really acknowledging him. I believe the church corporately has lost its way. God is saying enough is enough. I have moved recently to another city, and there is more life in one of the churches I have attended, but I think overall the games and familiarity have become so ingrained in many lives that many people wouldn't know if God was there or not. I am loathe to support something that is not functioning effectively. Where is his presence in our corporate gatherings? It's time to cry out to God and say, I will not give up until you come! Many people I talk to feel exactly the same. I am a deeply committed Christian of some 20 years. I did not leave church because of bitterness or hurt. -Simply because it is not doing the works of God!

Others had a lot to say about the way church is set-up today, and the fact that it does not seem to be particularly biblical or Christlike in their view. These people often had some very interesting things to say:

From: Orlando (-USA):

Clearly this "system" of Church that has been developed, recognized and accepted among many who are a part of what is considered "mainline Christianity" is not functioning according to the New Testament Church example that is given in the Scriptures. Instead of an actively living, growing, reproducing, unified and boundless organism (the Body of Christ), what has been formed is just an incorporated organization, private social club for the elite...

The very evidence that supports the fact that today's church system is not set up according to the New Testament Church standard are such phrases as "church hoppers", "my church/ your church" or even the question "who's church are you a member of?" These very phrases have become a very common and accepted part of the vast majority of Christians' vocabulary.

From: Richard (-USA):

My friend, Church is not, and I say again NOT, some place that you go. Church is something that you ARE. If you are not the Church, then going to some building in a pretext is not going to make you Church. You can put a horse in the garage, but that doesn't make him a car.

From: Marcia (-New Zealand):

In the Christian world it is very much like the secular world - ie. "What do you do?" Occupation determines who you are. With Christians- "What church do you attend?" determines who you are in Christ. So wrong - but it happens regularly. I hope one day people will stop doing this. I have not been attached to a church for 2 years now. I am very comfortable with my God who is really the delight of my soul. He understands me like no other.

From: Betty (-USA):

I found Jesus as my Savior when I was six years old, in a Foursquare church. I am now 57. I spent most of those years in the church system. And I was involved in the "ministry" of the church. I taught Sunday School, led the choir, played the piano, was two Pastor's secretary. But my heart always longed for more. So I found Aglow, Full Gospel Business Men's, home meetings. Always searching. About 10 years ago I remember asking Jesus, "Jesus, is this the church You said You would build?" By this time I was heart sick with the church and all its man's programs and lack of the presence and moving of God. About the same time someone gave me a book that opened my eyes and heart to see the truth of the five-fold in Eph 4. And I could see how that would never fit into the current church governmental structure. I went from church to church for quite awhile, always hoping that I would find one with the truth. But no. It is such a hard place to be, a wilderness. I long for corporate worship. I worship the Lord alone at home but without a doubt there is a dynamic to corporate worship that I am missing. You are right, we cannot stay out here in the wilderness, eventually we must come together. But.... we cannot bring about this "coming together" of Jesus's Church. Only He can.

Some of the emails I received were from people who had found it extremely liberating to be free of all the activities and restrictions of "church as we know it". They were now able to achieve far more for God than they ever had before. One delightful email came from a group of four elderly women who are now getting an astonishing amount done:

From: Pat (-USA):

Our little group has been free to do all sorts of ministry that we probably would never have done or even known about had we been busy with church activities. We've done 3 Alpha courses (2 of the young people who came to the Lord in our first Alpha are now ministering in drama at a huge church), we organized and participate in a group that works with the incarcerated young people in the local bootcamp. We've worked with the local youth. Three of us serve on the board of a ministry which is an outreach to the community... We support, both financially and spiritually, a local missionary to Mozambique. We sponsored a women's retreat... I teach a Bible class weekly at a local assisted living facility while another of our group is the CWA regional chairperson. One has become a licensed drug counselor and is doing Christian drug counseling. Another has a retreat center as her business.

We are doing what we could not do if we were in a traditional church. If four older women can have this much ministry, just think what could happen if people stopped looking at the back of each other's heads and started taking the great commission seriously... Here we are, a small group of women but empowered by a mighty God! What would happen if all who are anointed for ministry were free to move as the Spirit leads?

It is important to remember that the emails published in this book are representative of many thousands of Christians who are opting out of our churches in record numbers right now. I myself received hundreds and hundreds of replies to my original article - but it is only possible to publish a fraction of them here. This movement is huge. It is happening on a global scale and anecdotal evidence suggests that it is growing at a phenomenal rate. For every email published in this book, there were many others sent to me expressing similar concerns. We have to face the facts:- Thousands of devoted, praying Christians are leaving our churches - many never to return. Pollster George Barna has collected data that shows there are now ten million of them in America alone. And we desperately need to listen to their reasons as to why they leave.