



Beyond Sunday Church

For five decades and in growing numbers, Christians in America have been saying *No* to Sunday church. I think it is time we listened.

We have called the absent “unchurched,” “non-believers,” “former Christians,” “happy pagans,” “lost” and a “mission field—ripe for harvest.” These negative terms imply that the absent have a flaw that needs to be addressed.

New congregations, most shedding denominational baggage, have harvested some of these former mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churchgoers. But even their numbers rise and fall, especially when the founding pastor slips up or retires, and the overall trend in church participation remains down. In some Western states, Sunday churchgoing has fallen below ten-percent of the population.

When this slide in church attendance began in 1964, as Boomers graduated from high school, many church leaders didn’t even acknowledge it. For years they kept counting

the absent as present. Then, when the losses couldn’t be ignored, they blamed them on whatever hot-button issues were roiling the religious establishment, as if new liturgies, women in leadership and liberals (or

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conservatives, take your pick) had driven people away.

We need to see that these “formers” aren’t saying *No* to God or to their Christian identity or to their yearning for faith. Many are saying *No* to Sunday church. They are expressing a preference for something other than getting up early on Sunday, driving across town, sitting in a pew for 60 to 120 minutes, making small talk with people they don’t see elsewhere and driving home again.



by Tom Ehrich

They are saying *No* to Sunday, the only day they can get a slow start in this everyone-works-hard era. They are saying *No* to being an audience in an age of participation and self-determination. They are saying *No* to institutional preaching, repetitive liturgies and assemblies controlled by small cadres usually

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older than themselves. They are saying *No* to being told what to believe. They are saying *No* to having their real questions ignored.

Instead, they find spiritual enrichment on the Internet and on television. They read faith-related books. They pray without being told

what to pray. They find their own networks of faithful friends. The problem isn't their faith. The problem is Christianity's delivery system. We are stuck in trying to lure people to physical locations at a time of our choosing, to do what we think they ought to do and to be loyal in paying for it. It is time we looked beyond the paradigm of Sunday church.

I think the future lies in multi-channeling—a combination of on-site, online, workplace and at-home offerings that create networks of self-determining

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constituents, many of whom might never attend Sunday church. The first challenge, however, is to recognize how deeply wedded we are to Sunday on-site participation as the only true expression, and measure, of faithfulness. Almost everything about our institutions—facilities, ordination training, staffing, budgeting—aims to draw people to a central location on Sunday.

We need to see that what works for some doesn't work for others. Not because the others are flawed, not because our culture has collapsed, and not because "God is dead," but because things change. Just as Jesus took his ministry out of the synagogue and radically rethought the meaning of Sabbath, so God is drawing us away from "former things," even ones we treasure and consider our duty. □

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