

The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?

by Jim Davis and Michael Graham

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023. 242 pp.

Reviewed by Major Jessica Dawson



For a book about the exodus from the Church, opening with a mention of scandal-plagued preachers Benny Hinn and Paula White seems an odd choice. But this mention – in the context of writing about the promise of churches in Orlando in the 1990s/2000s – frames the many paradoxes in this book about those who have left the church. While Hinn and White are named as being part of the variety of congregations in Orlando, the mention was an immediate attention grabber.

The rise of the nones and the rapid secularizing of American society has been widely written about by sociologists but whether society is secularizing is a completely different question than why people appear to be leaving their churches (across all faiths, not just Christianity though the focus of their book is on Christianity). Their central argument is that America is facing what they call the Great Dechurching, an unprecedented crisis for communities of faith. They are writing for an audience of ministers and lay people alike who hope to bring people back to the fold.

Two of the authors of this book are members of Orlando Grace Church, with Jim Davis being a pastor and Michael Graham being a center director. The authors aim to present the results from survey work they conducted to better understand why people are leaving the church. As is standard with most academic

research discussions, their work opens with a description of their study. They clearly caveat that they are not academics, but they partnered with a political scientist to conduct the study: Ryan Burge, a professor at Eastern Illinois University. They conducted their survey in three phases designed to answer three questions: How big is the problem, who is leaving and why, and what, specifically is happening in evangelicalism.

The audience for this book is clearly evangelical ministers who seek to understand why people have left the church as well as mechanisms to draw people back. This is the book's greatest strength but also its greatest weakness. While they confront issues of misogyny, abuse, political intolerance, and other issues that have driven people from the church, the messages for the dechurched do not present a road map for either pastors to help people return or for the dechurched themselves. Perhaps that is not what they intended to do, which would mean that it is not the fault of the authors, but I found myself hungry for interpretations anchored in faith communities that would help explain different theological perspectives that might help inform at least initial conversations that attempt to cross some of the uncrossable chasms.

They describe five groups of dechurched: Cultural Christians, Dechurched Mainstream

Evangelicals, Exvangelicals, Dechurched BIPOC and Dechurched Mainline Protestants and Catholics. They find both similarities and differences between the dechurched across denominations – men and women are leaving the church at similar rates. That said, dechurched LGBTQ+ individuals appear to have left the church for different reasons and in larger numbers with 66% of lesbian/gay women in their survey stating they rarely attend services and over 73% of gay men saying the same compared to 51% of straight respondents.

They are aware that the same factors which drive some from the church, e.g., hyper politicization, may be the very thing that keeps others attending. They paint a very difficult and accurate picture for ministers struggling to navigate these complicated times. In one early chapter, they talk about praying with parents who are deeply saddened by their children having left the church. They state that “anecdotally, we know of almost no parents over the age of fifty who don’t have at least one adult child who is dechurched.”¹ This is presented as deeply painful for the parents. Rather than expanding on why those parents believe their children left or unpacking why those parents felt their adult children dechurched, we are left with a gap. Their research suggests that the top five reasons people state about their parents influencing their decision to leave the church were “emphasis on culture war; lack of love or joy; inability to listen; inability to engage with other viewpoints or racial attitudes or action.”²

They anchor their discussion of dechurching in broader societal trends of “cultural fracturing, more privatization, erosion of institutions, loss of public trust and thinner communities.”³ Despite these larger cultural trends, the book is filled

with interesting findings that might be largely counter intuitive, particularly for those not well versed in sociological or religious literature about the dechurching phenomenon. One very interesting finding is that education is negatively associated with dechurching. Put another way, higher levels of educations are associated with remaining affiliated with a church, at least in the chapter on Mainline Protestants and Catholics.

From a methodological standpoint, they do not provide their survey questions nor do they provide many insights into how they conducted their analysis. There’s no discussion of whether findings were statistically significant and it is unclear how they constructed their models. They do not define how they use the term algorithm. This however, may only be an issue to people who are familiar with survey construction and methodologies. There are other methodological issues that, for the sake of space, I won’t go into however, suffice to say it is difficult to take their claims seriously due to the lack of clarity in their methodology. With those caveats in mind, probably the biggest surprise of their study is that every faith group appears to be facing a similar trend. Dechurching is not restricted to only evangelicals.

The authors are very blunt in some cases, pointing out that the modern church is “financially incentivized to target the wealthy and create a space where... those feel comfortable.”⁴ Dechurching is presented as bad for churches, but numerous anecdotes scattered throughout the book make the argument that dechurching may actually be good for individuals/families. The authors point out that dechurched evangelicals are more likely to be married, report lower divorce rates, and better mental health than folks who

remain in churches. This paradox is the beating heart of the problem presented in the book. Later, they point out the positive health effects of attending religious services, making it unclear, or at least contested, as to whether dechurching has a positive or negative impact on the individual.

The authors are keen on drawing people back to the church. They are frequently clear about why people left. They are less clear on how to cross nearly impassable divides or even what those divides might be. They are clear where they stand theologically – that they take the divinity of Jesus and his atonement for sin, the resurrection and eternal salvation from faith is central to what they call their primary concerns. But there are critical issues that the authors simply do not engage with in any meaningful or robust way. Fully one third of dechurched evangelicals stated they had no interest in returning to any church.

When they discuss the nearly 20% of people who have left the church due to misogyny and teachings surrounding women, they don’t offer great solutions. They are very clear that “many of the dechurched perceive the church to be patriarchal, unhelpfully hierarchical and oppressive to women” and are explicit in telling their reader that “if you feel resistance [to the idea of the dechurched who cite misogyny as reasons they departed] . . . may still have some work to do in comprehending the problem.”⁵ For example, the chapter on “Dechurched Mainstream Evangelicals” suggests that they left largely around COVID. But the opening vignette of the chapter is about Hannah, a devout Christian woman who struggled through years of fertility treatment to finally give birth to twins. Hannah’s story points out that while the church was initially

supportive through the early stages of her difficult pregnancy, it largely was absent for much of the time that she and her husband needed them. That this coincided with COVID is given more weight than the potential feelings of abandonment that Hannah may have felt as she struggled through issues related to starting her family. The authors present care for the unborn as a central tenant but then offer very little by way of restructuring their communities to care for the born.

This falls short for several reasons. First, it doesn't help the minister who may be looking for deeper theological understandings of feminist theology (or other theologies) that might help fill gaps in their own tradition, nor does it give ministers and pastors a place to look for more inclusive churches. Perhaps this is not the goal of the book, but the lack of engagement with feminist theology to help enrich the readers feels like a critical

oversight. The only engagement with the theological implications of abortion appears to be in survey questions that indicate the question was whether the respondents would have one. This fundamentally fails to serve women who may have needed medically necessary abortions or who find little spiritual comfort in the current debate. It also obscures the historic fact that abortion was largely not a motivating issue for evangelicals until after Civil Rights legislation when church leaders began using it as a tool for political mobilization.

For those unfamiliar with the topic of dechuraching, *The Great Dechuraching* is a potentially a solid introduction to the discussion but with the limitations that we don't really know how generalizable their findings are beyond the communities they sampled. For those hungry for deeper understandings of the theological, political, and cultural arguments underpinning people's

decision to leave, this book will leave readers lacking. For anyone hoping to engage more seriously with bringing women back to the church, they are going to need to look elsewhere. The authors clearly understand that women are leaving the church for different reasons than men but do not engage with the theological questions around gender and sexuality that might help ministers expand their ability to engage with some of these dechurched. They offer very little by way of restructuring resources – either theological, financial, or otherwise, to make coming back to the church easier for who are not from wealthy, heterosexual, nuclear families. They focus on the spiritual mission of the church as a solution when many of the problems their survey identified are not problems of faith but of families, communities, politics, and organizations. If faith were the solution to the problem of dechuraching, well, they might not have had to write the book.

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NOTES

1 Davis and Graham, *Great Dechuraching*, 9.

2 Davis and Graham, *Great Dechuraching*, 9-10.

3 Davis and Graham, *Great Dechuraching*, 19.

4 Davis and Graham, *Great Dechuraching*, 27.

5 Davis and Graham, *Great Dechuraching*, 169.