

# Welcoming “Time Share” Christians



By Gil Rendle

**W**ith uncommon clarity, the Episcopal rector listened to the complaints from the leaders of the children’s Christian education program. They were frustrated with curriculum that assumed children would be regularly present week after week, when in fact the children more commonly attended only one or two Sundays each month. They lamented the difficulty of recruiting teachers willing to lead classes for more than a few weeks in a row, because those adults themselves were typically absent at a rate similar to the children.

Wisely, the rector neither commiserated nor problem solved but responded with a challenge. “Of course that’s what’s happening,” he said. “What it means,” he continued, “is that we need to learn how to stop doing ministry with pew renters and start doing ministry with time share people.”

## *Pew Renters and Time Share Christians*

“Pew renters,” of course, is an image that comes from an earlier history of congregations where people supported the church budget by renting their pews. The expectation was that no one other than the renter should have the right to sit in that pew. However, the corresponding expectation was that once a person rented a pew he or she *should* sit there—every Sunday. The rector’s insight was that there are fewer and fewer “pew renters” involved in the church today but an ever-growing number of “time share Christians.”

Time share Christians are people who make a commitment to a church but who can only be there a portion of the time. Rather than buy a vacation home that would require a constant commitment, the time share vacationer purchases a share of time to use

the house or condo, suiting both the need and the resources of the vacationer. The condo and the vacation are important, but the need to “buy the whole package” doesn’t fit the person’s lifestyle. Likewise, time share Christians are people committed to the pursuit and practice of Christian discipleship but for whom the “whole package” of regular attendance at one congregation no longer fits. The desire for a relationship with God and for a way of life disciplined by faith may be a full time pursuit, but it is less likely to be practiced in one single congregation and with weekly regularity.

## *A Decreasing Margin of Life*

At the heart of the change is the decreasing margin of life—the amount of discretionary time left over after people have fulfilled the primary commitments they have made (for example, to work and family). This shrinking discretionary portion of our lives is a common experience for many people today. It is instructive to note that over the past century, the continuous invention of labor-saving devices has had the effect of increasing the work week. It appears that we are a people geared not to use available time to deepen our lives, but rather to pack more work and activities into the quiet spaces of undesignated time. For instance, my grandfather Henry at one time wore a shirt for two or three days before he put it in the wash. However, with the invention of the automatic clothes washer, which should have shortened my grandmother Bessie’s work week, Henry started to wear a shirt for only one day before putting it in the wash. The net effect was not more undesignated time for Bessie, but more work that could now be done more effectively to make her more productive. The ongoing search for increased productivity in the various spheres

of our lives—work, marriage, family, friendships, leisure, fitness—is supported by an advertising industry that is always prepared to offer us more choices of how to spend our time, and has affected our decision making drastically.

### ***How Might the Church Respond?***

This large cultural shift, increasingly experienced by younger generations, constitutes a new environment in which churches must learn a new “cultural language.” This is a moment in which the contemporary American church needs to learn anew how to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land. The new foreign land is the changed culture around us. The new foreign land requires churches to reconsider common practices and assumptions. Consider these five places to begin.

#### ***1. Can the church resist problem solving and people fixing?***

Problem solving is so deeply embedded a leadership practice in our North American culture that when confronted with practices that no longer work, our first response is to “fix” something. One of the most popular things to fix is “other people.” Much conversation in our churches today is focused on what’s wrong with “those people” who don’t attend regularly and how can we fix them. Second on the list seems to be a need to fix our church programs (or worship services, or facilities, or any number of things). Since people don’t respond in ways they once did, the assumption seems to be that some corrective action needs to be taken.

One of the greatest challenges for church leaders is to accept that there is no “problem” to fix here. In order for something to be a problem, by definition, there must be a solution. However, sweeping cultural shifts do not lend themselves to solution. It is unlikely that the local church is going to be able to produce a solution that will shift children’s soccer game schedules away from Sunday mornings. It is unlikely that the local church is going to be able to decrease the work week. Without an available solution, a situation can no longer be addressed as a problem but needs to be engaged as a “condition.” Problems require *action*. Conditions require *learning*. Can church leaders stop trying to fix people and programs, and risk learning new ways to be a church that serves time share Christians?

#### ***2. Can the church rethink its assumptions about membership?***

Many churches continue to use an outdated model of membership based on expected levels of activity and support. Membership is assumed to involve steady participation in worship and programs, regular financial support, willingness to serve on committees, and a desire to know many, if not all, of the other members. In many congregations, this definition of membership is used to identify pew renters as “good members” and time share people as “bad members.” Can leaders see time share Christians as people on a different path of discipleship instead of as “bad members?”

#### ***3. Can the church shift from membership to participation models?***

Earlier cultural norms made membership a critical matter. Membership demanded full participation and

loyalty. For example, in the business community, the nation’s three largest service organizations—Lions Clubs International, Rotary International, and Kiwanis International—originally had weekly requirements for meeting attendance. To be a member meant to be present. Not to be present jeopardized membership. In earlier years, fathers left their families while vacationing to find a nearby meeting of the Rotary club so that attendance requirements were met and membership would not be challenged. Beginning in the 1990s, these organizations experienced regular membership decline by as much as 5% annually. More recently, these service organizations began moving away from the singular membership model and experimenting with participation models, shifting requirements for attendance to as little as once a

### **A Christmas Prayer for Those Who Don’t Go to Church**

Lord, I don’t go to church much.  
I don’t go at all...well, I go at Christmas.  
I’m home then.  
I feel drawn to it.  
I like the Christmas Eve service,  
the coolness of the air.  
I feel like a kid again...It’s surreal.

I know folks make fun of people like me.  
What can I say? I’ve drifted...but there is a pull back.  
Are You saying something to me?

I hear something in the sermon, sometimes,  
but mostly it’s the music and the candles.  
What is it about those candles?  
And the darkness?  
The darkness...it’s the light, I suppose.  
Light and darkness.

I know about light and darkness.  
I live in both.  
I’ve got some of both in me.  
I’m basically a good person, but I struggle...  
I know about light and darkness.  
But I want to be closer to the light.  
I want to light that candle and sing those songs.

And in the dark street shineth, the everlasting light.

I would like to live in that light, Lord.  
I would like to meet Jesus.  
Maybe what I’m saying is that I would like to be born again...  
maybe that’s what Christmas really means.

—Ken Carter

**Ken Carter is Senior Pastor of Providence United Methodist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina. With acknowledgement of authorship, this poem may be reprinted in church bulletins and newsletters.**

month, adding cyberclubs that meet on the Internet, family clubs that involve parents and children, and early morning gatherings at Starbucks. The earlier membership model that identified individuals as “bad members” for missing meetings shifted to a participation model that recognized and facilitated the multiple ways in which people could participate. Can the church experiment with new participation models?



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**4. Can the church learn to be steady in purpose and flexible in strategy?**

One of the principles of healthy, vibrant systems is that they must be steady in purpose but flexible in strategy. A bird that has learned how to forage for food in a forest has to remain steady in its pursuit of food but be very flexible in its strategy when the forest is developed into homes or industrial space. Likewise, churches need to be clear about what is purpose and what is strategy. In one congregation, a long, historic commitment to an unpopular Christmas Eve worship service was sustained for decades simply because it was the liturgical setting that the church brought from its “mother church” when the people left Europe. Despite the complaints and decreasing attendance on Christmas Eve, the congregation faithfully continued its practice. When the pastor finally contacted the mother church in Europe to find out how they handled the problem with the unpopular liturgy, all were greatly surprised that the mother church had discontinued the liturgy over 30 years earlier because it was no longer effective. The daughter church had mistakenly become steady in strategy and had forgotten its purpose. The purpose of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples for the transformation of the world, not to stay faithful to old strategies that seek new members to enjoy what members have done in the past.

**5. Can the church practice Christian hospitality?**

Hospitality is not fixing up your church just the way you like it and then inviting others to come and enjoy it with you. That form of hospitality suffers under the needs of the new people invited in. Hospitality in the biblical sense is making space for new people to do what *they* need in their search for God and their practice of discipleship. Can the church make the shift? □

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