

Why I Don't Go to Church

By Erin Stanley

Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it.

—Chip Heath and Dan Heath,
Made to Stick

It is often hard for those of us inside the church to understand why others choose to remain outside the church. An important first step in reaching the unchurched and dechurched is listening to their reasons, perceptions, and experiences of the church. Why don't they believe? Why don't they come? One nonbeliever shares her perspective.

Religion is ubiquitous in our culture. You see references to it in crossword puzzles, on billboards, on television and radio. Many people don't go through one day without saying a prayer, looking humbly to the sky, or asking questions about "something greater than ourselves."

Growing up unchurched in a conservative Midwestern suburb, I found myself asking some very different questions: "Will my friends still like me if they know I don't believe?" "How can something so comfortable for them feel so uncomfortable for me?" And as I've matured into adulthood, "What keeps me from going to church and accepting Christianity?" With Christian churches asking this very same question about people like me, church leaders might benefit from some perspective on this issue from my experience as a non-Christian.

As a nonbeliever begins to explore religions, one major point of contention is the question of how any one religion can attest to being the ultimate truth while existing among so many others. Since religion is the practice of "faith," defined as "belief

not based on proof," no one religion will ever be proven correct or incorrect in this lifetime. For me to wholeheartedly accept any one faith, I would need to reconcile the existence of others from inside that respective faith. But since Christianity professes it is the "one way" to eternal life, it can only call the pluralism of an Eastern religion, for example, invalid. I do not understand how any one faith can insist that another is wrong. Since faith by definition cannot be proven, all religions must be viewed as equally plausible. Lack of concrete fact is what makes religion the wonder that it is, so why do many Christians wish to assert their faith as the ultimate truth?

It does not bother me that people have faith in God, or that people have faith in a

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place called Heaven. But I cannot embrace this seemingly ultimatum-based faith, and I see Christianity's rules for attaining eternal life as being among the most arrogant of religions I have learned about.

Another point of contention is the way Christians claim to have a monopoly on morality. I'll never forget my 5th-grade teacher, who at one point learned that my

family wasn't Christian, and with a sense of disbelief, said, "Erin, that really surprises me, since you are all such good people." For sixteen years this has remained a conflicting statement to me, as I have yet to learn exactly what about being a Christian makes a person more moral than a non-Christian. We have all witnessed the extremes of depravity and moral complacency displayed by some Christians, and it proves that Christians are not necessarily more moral than non-Christians.

I believe in universal morality independent of religion; specifically that a person's sense of morality comes from social code, cultural trends, and upbringing. To me, the way a person's everyday life is led is the most powerful indicator of his or her sense of morality. In the words of Rabbi Albert Lewis, "Faith is about doing. You are how you act, not just how you believe." This reminds me that the morality of everyday life is in no way defined by, or dependent upon, creed.

Third, it seems that most churchgoers are not going to church to learn about Christianity, and this shift in focus is allowing modern-day church to lose the intellectual and doctrinal credibility it once had. Churches exist to provide accountability, comfort, community, and a safe haven where like-minded worshipers can gather. People feel better after going to church; not because they've just had a conversation with God, but because they felt a part of something bigger than themselves, and left with the powerful sense that everything will be okay. There is nothing wrong with going to church for these reasons, until it becomes a substitute for actually learning and practicing the core tenets of your faith. Though they claim the Bible is so important, many Chris-

tians have not read the entire Bible, and many would much rather get caught up in the dogma of “having a personal relationship with Jesus” than reading about what he actually did. Would it be too scary to ask the big questions about Jesus and the theology based on him? I understand that an unwavering faith is what carries Christians, but this should not be an excuse to deemphasize doctrinal study and awareness. In this respect, churches often foster lemmings, and create a paradox out of the idea of having an “intellectual faith.” This presents Christianity as more of a blind community than an active faith, and I do not find that appealing.

Most important, I wish Christians understood how completely arbitrary it would be for an unchurched individual to choose Christianity over any other religion. Religion is something that most people are indoctrinated into early in their lives, and it becomes what they know to be true. This becomes a problem when religious people expect this knowledge to be just as natural to the unchurched. In the same way that Christians “know” that Jesus was resurrected, I “know” that to be impossible. One perspective is not superior to the other; it is simply what our brains are conditioned to believe is possible. Christians are conditioned to trust and believe the word of God, and I, simply, am not. I want Christians to understand and respect the fact that since religion is so foreign to many of the unchurched, they have the same chance of attracting the unchurched as any other religion does.

We all want spiritual fulfillment, and in a world where so many rifts are created by religion, the Christian church definitely has a challenging road ahead of it. I hope that someday our differences will cease to create divisions. Ultimately, what would be so wrong about faiths uniting to make people the best they can be, independent of religious conviction? That is the type of church in which I would prefer to believe. □



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A Sermon Starter from

RETHINK CHURCH

Rethink Witnessing (Acts 8:26-40)

“So Philip ran up... and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’” (Acts 8:30, NRSV)

Philip the evangelist saw a potential believer in Christ, where others might have seen a person to avoid. By demonstrating faithfulness to the Gospel and willingness to take the message to unusual people, in unusual places, Philip gives a powerful witness and example. What if we stepped outside the church to meet people where they are instead of expecting them to come to us?

Questions to Consider

- How can I be a witness for Christ in my daily life?
- How can we go to the community with a message of hope instead of expecting people to come to us?
- How are we measuring success and how can we reevaluate those measures?
- Who are the people we might normally pass by without noticing?
- Knowing we can't do everything by ourselves, what community organizations can we explore as partners to make this community a better place?

Possible Themes

- Witnessing not just with our words but also with our acts of service
- Prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness — new membership language in Discipline
- The Church is not a building
- “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.”
- Removing the stigma of evangelism
- Faith and good works as part of Wesleyan DNA
- Authenticity, being real, dropping the act

Image Ideas

Walk the talk, doors, person helping another, person with sign asking for food, conversation, outward focus.

Video Ideas

- UMTV stories: “Church in a Box” (church solves space issue by expanding to second site, with worship center in a box); “Dramatic Worship” (Hot Metal Bridge congregation in Pittsburgh does church in new ways for new people); “Church Runs Restaurant” (a congregation starts a restaurant to meet community needs and neighbors)
- Movie clip: *Chocolat* (new people in the community can bring new energy and new perspectives)

Action Ideas

- Practice “Random Acts of Witnessing” — like “Random Acts of Kindness” but instead, talk to people and hear about their faith questions.
- Brainstorm possibilities for starting a new faith community in an unexpected and “outside-the-box” place.
- Explore community partnerships as ways to reach new people in new places — perhaps you could provide space for groups who need a place to meet.
- Share “life stories” and “soul stories” with others; begin conversations to learn about their lives and interests.
- Hold events off-site, outside the walls and physical boundaries of the church.
- Plan ways to “be the church” on other days of the week — not just Sunday.
- Study Christianity’s core beliefs; get back to basics to equip people for soul sharing.

Resources for United Methodist congregations and conferences:
www.rethinkchurch.org

For those looking for their doorway to changing the world:
www.10thousanddoors.org



Rethink Church Sermon Starters for Lent are online now at www.rethinkchurch.com/lent