

Transition or Revolution!

WE FACE A CRISIS!

I was reading the Age a couple of weeks ago when an article caught my eye: **“Generation Y turning away from religion”**

“Fewer than half Australia's young people believe in a god, and many believe there is little truth in religion, a new study has found just 48 per cent of Generation Y, defined as those born between 1976 and 1990, believed in a god. Dr Andrew Singleton, of Monash University, a co-author of the study, said they were surprised by the findings. *“It's well known that there has been a turn away from church attendance and participation in young people,”* he said. *“But we thought there was going, to be a move towards alternative spiritualities...”*

The study also found just 19 per cent of those who identify themselves as Christian were actively involved in a church, attending services at least once a month.

Dr Singleton said it was a trend that was likely to continue. *“One of the many predictors of whether we become religious is our parents, and unless there is a massive cultural shift, I see that the trajectory will continue as it is.”*

We need to wake up fast that the institutional church as we know it has **failed** **dismally** to impact the last two generations with the Good News of Christ. Only one in five 16-30 year olds believe in God... Only one in five of the few who do believe - find belonging in the church!

We need to recognise that the apparent health of youthful churches such as ours has more to do with desperate Christian parents hunting for churches with bright youth groups than it does with people choosing to follow Christ.

We need with urgency to realise that we have failed. The majority of Australian youth and twenties don't encounter the Kingdom in the professionally produced services; safe Christian entertainment; Sunday school programmes; outreach events (with prizes) and emotionally charged celebration events; that have become our bread and butter. How do I know this? Because for the last fifty years we have lost ground! It is the GRANDPARENTS of these kids that were the last genuine 'churched' generation. **ONLY ONE IN FIVE, OF THE ONE IN TWO 16-30s WHO BELIEVE IN GOD GOES TO CHURCH!**

WHAT TO DO?

1. **BECOME MISSIONARIES:** Get rid of the idea that the clergy are called to do the work of the Kingdom. You are all missionaries. All of you are called to follow Christ into the World carrying your cross! Your vocation, your residence, your quality of life are subordinate to being sent into this world as Christ was sent. Are you prepared to 'live by faith' as we expect our cross-cultural missionaries to do? Do you see your church as the mission team that you are sold out to? Your neighbourhood as the 'tribe' into which you live? If you can't accept this, forget planning towards transition!

2. **COMMUNITY NOT CONSUMPTION:** Your church must cease to be needs-based. We must stop thinking of ourselves as consumers who shop for the right sort of church that 'meets our needs'. No more driving across town to find a designer church. Don't make it easy for Christian friends to 'church hop'. Don't market to your demographic. The gospel calls people to join a radically different Kingdom. One that stands utterly defiantly against the social and spiritual powers of the world. One where a community of unlikely people love each other practically in spite of everything to the point where their neighbours CAN'T BELIEVE WHAT THEY ARE WITNESSING – and want to know about the Jesus who has transformed these individuals into a family.
3. **BE SHAPED BY THE BIBLE:** Take the time to re-enter the Bible 'story' – Don't just dip into the bible for a juicy verse here and there. Steer away from viewing it as a handbook for prosperous living, loaded with good hints! Re-enter the narrative. Read and reread the stories as actual stories. Ask what they meant to the original hearers – what sort of God was engaging them? As you do this, slowly, allowing time to mull over together – what does the Spirit reveal to us? As you do this, the assumptions and modern myths we read back into the bible will fall away. We become pilgrims on the same journey as they! God will become real, not synthesised by the myriad of videos, books and motivational speakers we have become accustomed to. Even the Old Testament will become a burning light to your path! As this happens you will become a company of interpreters. It wouldn't be the pastor's vision or the spiritual elite who shape the church, but the scriptures reading the company of believers – and that ironically is what the Baptists of old practised. Do this in smaller groups too. Your prayers will flow from your reading. Use your commentaries for background not for answers. Burn your pre-digested '*10-questions-about-the-chapter-studyguides*'.
4. **BECOME CONTEXTUAL:** Gradually close down all the outreach programmes '*we've always run*'. Instead, in your smaller groups, talk about what you can see God doing in your broader community. Who do you really know well? What local activities, clubs or networks are you part of? If you are like me, you'll discover you really don't engage the local community in the way we expect 'real' missionaries to do. Not only that, but you will probably discover that most of your outreach events depend on 'them' coming to 'us' – rather than us being incarnated amongst them. Let the Spirit guide you as you create the space to connect with the people God has put into your life. Do it relevantly to their context. Do it as a peer, not as an expert-in-faith. Most likely you will be hoping that the 'seeker sensitive' feel of Sunday Worship is the ultimate entrée into the Kingdom. I suspect that Sunday is actually the LEAST helpful thing we do. I sometimes wish I could shut down all Sunday services for a month; encourage the Christians to worship and minister in their Small Groups (what else are they for) and use Sundays to get out amongst their non church community: BBQs, festivals, sporting events, meals in pubs, extended family gatherings and so on.... !
5. **COVENANT PRACTISES:** We haven't done spiritual formation (discipleship) well. There's a huge number of 18-40s who really don't know how to live out their faith. The result is a swag of mid life spiritual crises. Marriages in strife, parents with little idea of how you 'form' their kids. I think that's why there is so much pressure on churches and their pastors to provide counselling, pastoral care, prayer ministry, Sunday school, youth groups and inspirational music - because we haven't equipped Christians to do this fundamental stuff for themselves – and for each other. We can't develop good small groups, self-sustaining church plants or emergent congregations until we get this right! We need to revisit the early Methodists, for whom small groups meant accountability to lifestyle – not 'fellowship'. As we let the Bible read us, we need to articulate faith-practises to which our

members covenant – a common rule of life that shapes our spiritual experience. We need to abandon mono-generational children's and youth ministry totally. I've known this to be true for 20 years – having run a large 'successful' youth ministry. Give it up all you youth pastors out there! We need to be re-forming the parents and households so that they build a positive experience of faith into 11-13 year olds. Parents are either the biggest asset or liability we have – but we ignore them and create evening church kingdoms that can be every bit as enslaved to modernity as the 'oldies' ever were! By the way, we need a 'pathway to adulthood' with rites to mark the passage to maturity. How many Baptist kids are there in their 30s still *'waiting till the Lord tells them they're ready to get baptised'*? Maybe we need a catechesis path for all youth and older converts

- 6. STRATEGY:** Once we've given prayer and thought to these five areas, then we are ready to look at structure and transition. My background has trained me to believe that Vision comes first. But I wonder if it oughtn't come last. Purpose-driven is fine, but I think the five points listed above are the purpose that needs driving – however I find it all too easy to turn vision into a snappy mission statement; set of five-year programmatic goals; season them with a plan-of-action; wrap them all up in an organisational flowchart; and then promote them as my grand solution. We need the congregation to wrestle with the other stuff and wait for God's direction to emerge. There needs to be a measure of frustration and anxiety as we settle down to listening for God's rhythms for Kingdom. Take risks, remember its about the wine not the wineskins. God's new wineskin may not be half as comfortable as the old. You may lose members! You and I may lose our positions of influence or control. We are not a business, nor do we have customers in the same way as a corporation. I used to think we did, but I'm not sure those metaphors are helpful.

Only one in five of the one in two 16-30s who believe in God goes to church! It will be worse for the 0-16s! Serious as this is; history shows that it is when God's people come to the end of their resources, when there is nothing left to try, when there is nothing but a remnant *'weeping by the rivers of Babylon'* – that's when God can do a new thing – a transition in fact!

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