Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts by Sam S. Rainer

Painful Must-Read

Why do so many young adults (18 to 22) leave the church, and what will it take to bring them back? This important question is examined and duly answered in Essential Church?, a follow-up to Thom S. Rainer’s best-selling Simple Church cowritten this time with his son, research expert Sam Rainer.

The book is based on a study of one-thousand so-called church dropouts who were interviewed about why they left. Their answers are quite surprising, having less to do with losing their religion and more about the desire for a community that isn’t made stale by simply maintaining the status quo.

In turn, the Rainers offer churches four concrete solutions toward making their worship community an essential part these young people’s lives again:

Simplify - develop a clear structure and process for making disciples.

Deepen - provide strong biblical teaching and preaching.

Expect - let members know the need for commitment to the congregation.

Multiply - emphasize evangelism, outward focus, and starting new churches.

My Personal Review:
Rainer and his son wrote Essential Church: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts based on a nationwide survey of those leaving the church in recent years. Their findings are interesting and provocative.

The American church is dying. Conversions are declining in almost every denomination. Even in some of the more relatively healthy denominations, conversions to Christianity have stagnated...
Perhaps most startling is the gravity of how many exit the church and
the pace at which this exodus is occurring. Each generation that passes
loses more than the previous generation. Shock does not begin to describe
how we felt after reading the research results. The church is losing the
generational battle. Not only are we losing our nation to the ways of the
world, but we are not winning our own children in Christian families.
Multitudes are dropping out of the church. Page 14

They stress like others, that the loss is greatest among the young:

The average church is losing the young generation, and those young
adults are not returning. Page 8
More than two-thirds of young churchgoing adults in America drop out of
church between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. Page 75

And their explanation makes sense, and squares with what I've seen:

The most glaring issue of estrangement for eighteen- to twenty-two-
year-olds is the interminable gap between their personal beliefs and their
church's stated beliefs. ... Only 53 percent of all young adult churchgoers
state that they are in line with the beliefs of their church. To be blunt, God
has converted our children, but we have failed to disciple them. Page 30

They document not only quantitative decline, but decline in quality:

One survey states that only half of churches feel that they do a good job
of engaging the community and making others feel welcome. Additionally,
only 40 percent of these churches feel that they have any real impact on
the community of the world. This survey was taken among people within
the church. So 60 percent of the people in our churches do not believe
they are making an impact on their community. Page 55

They also confirm other sources indicating that the dramatic increase in
busyness among Americans makes church involvement less likely:

Were busy people. We bolt about our daily routine in a tornado of rapid
activity. Time is a precious commodity and we fill our time with as many
activities as possible. We cram one-hour tasks into fifteen minutes, and
then we speed twenty-five miles over the speed limit to make up for the
rest. We overcommit. We underplan. We procrastinate. Were perpetually
late. Then we complain about little sleep and no time for exercise or
leisure. Americans spend their time like their money, using as much as
they have (if not more) and saving none. Page 74

Through our research we were not surprised to learn that new and busy
schedules often moved the church to a lower priority among the
dechurched. Page 75
I was interested by their finding that those leaving don’t feel bitter about the church, and still consider themselves Christians. They are leaving because they don’t see any reason to continue.

Particularly with the younger generation, church is another time slot to fill. It is a check box on the weekly to-do list. The churches of the dropouts were not a place where they wanted to spend free time. It was the opposite. Church was just another time waster for them... droves of students are divorcing the church, and they do not cite irreconcilable differences. They do not leave mad. For many, no one compelling factor is pushing them away. They just want a little time off. They want their space. When they leave the church, there is no void. A gaping hole doesn’t form when they exit. They leave quietly, and the church continues on as usual.

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Apparently, a big part of this failure has to do with the lack of interest in college students on the part of churches.

Most churches do not have a college and career ministry for young adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. And the reason is not because these churches are located outside of college towns. Ten percent of the population in the United States is between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. That’s more than thirty million student-age people! Page 81

To me, this is incomprehensible, although I’ve seen this myself. We find most churches have little or nothing going on with college students--the most promising age range for raising up workers who serve God long-term. I think it goes to show that churches are more interested in adults who pay the bills than in raising up workers.

This is a good book. Recommended.

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