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CHURCH PLANTING

Exit Stage Left: Why the Spiritually Mature are Leaving the Church

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*Last month we looked at [George Barna's new book](#), *Revolution*, which reveals that a growing number of people are seeking spiritual growth outside the institutional church. In this post Dave Terpstra, pastor at The Next Level Church in Denver and a regular contributor to *Ur*, explores why Barna may be correct. Although many will say preaching, music, or programs are why they left a church, Terpstra wonders if more people are simply outgrowing the church's ability to spiritually nourish their faith.*

I'm sure there are just as many reasons that people leave churches as there are people who leave them. Perhaps more. In this consumer culture I'm sure that many people who leave churches are going to search for a better or newer "product." But recently I've wondered if some followers of Christ simply outgrow churches.

If you haven't read the book *The Critical Journey* by Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich (Second Edition, Sheffield Publishing 2005) you need to pick up a copy. Although the book's subject is spiritual formation and not church dynamics, it gives great insights into why people leave the church - reasons many pastors have likely never considered.

Hagberg and Guelich propose that most spiritual journeys tend to move in six distinct stages. The first three are easy to see and hard to argue with: (1) Recognition of God, (2) The Life of Discipleship, and (3) The Productive Life. Certainly after most people become followers of Christ (stage 1) they begin to absorb as much content (stage 2) as possible. Then sometime later they begin to serve (stage 3). And since the authors propose that the stages are cumulative, people of faith continue to be good at these stages over the long haul. I believe these are the three stages of faith where our churches excel and where most church leadership energy is expended.

But Hagberg and Guelich suggest there are still three stages to go, and it is the fourth I want to focus on. The fourth stage is called "The Journey Inward." The authors suggest that at some point our faith shifts focus from the externals of discipleship and service and begins to become internalized. We begin to redefine our impressions of the faith and to some degree even our theology as we mature.

This fourth stage is where my experience (and the authors') reveals the church's weakness. Speaking in generalities, churches do not specialize in people who have been following Christ for years and who are deeply questioning and reexamining their beliefs. It's especially difficult when people who reach stage four are in positions of influence and leadership. Churches, from the mega to the mini, are designed to help people mature in the external areas of service and discipleship, not the internal struggles of identity and meaning.

So what happens when people get burnt out on the basic teaching and serving. Some go looking for fresh new content and areas of service. Some discover a new teacher across town who "really" teaches the Bible. Some discover service to the under-resourced or in foreign countries. While their true need may be for something deeper, they settle for at least something different.

Chances are you have not only seen these attempts at continued growth in stages two and three, but you have experienced them yourself. Maybe you have even suggested them to others. But if you have experienced stage four yourself then you know what comes at the end: "The Wall." Our attempts to continue to grow in discipleship and service eventually wear out. Many people become so disillusioned they leave the church (physically or at least metaphorically by "checking out").

Obviously churches can't stop evangelizing and doing the basics of discipleship. After all, most of our people are in stages 1, 2, or 3. But how do we walk alongside those on the Journey Inward. What do we do when someone hits the spiritual wall. What happens when we as leaders reach that place? I believe it is this moment in our journey when we need the church most; so what's a local church to do?



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