

# A Changing World

Why “The Way It Used To Be” Has Changed So Rapidly  
Chapter 1 of [\*“The Invitational Christian”\* by Dave Daubert](#)

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It is no secret that church life was once a centerpiece of north American culture and has slowly but steadily moved into the shadows. You may already know specific reasons for this shift, or you may simply “know” it intuitively because the congregation where you participate has been shrinking and aging.

There are many myths about Christianity and its golden age. For example, many believe that the United States was founded in order to be a Christian nation. While it’s true that there were many Christians involved in founding the country, there were also those who were not only not Christian, but who opposed the involvement of any religious institutions in the work of becoming a nation. While most of the founders did believe in God in some way, their views and convictions were all over the map. They worked hard to acknowledge a shared belief in God and a conviction that the world had certain realities derived from God, but also to be clear that this new country would be an experiment in cultivating a national identity without any official religious expression. While Christianity was an important part of the backdrop, it was not included in the essence of what it meant to be an American.

That information is important, but historic. It provides a backdrop for the current downward trends of the last few decades.

More formative to the church in America was its rise in the aftermath of World War II. Christianity was the dominant religious force in the United States and it peaked during the 1950s when three things came together at the same time:

First, the triumph of our allies over Japan and Germany in World War II meant that the U.S. entered a time of great growth and prosperity. Soldiers returning home and the infusion of cash through things like the GI Bill meant Americans were rebuilding the economy. As they built homes and expanded the workforce, the demand for all new things to furnish their homes and offices increased. New technologies meant that owning cars and televisions became standard. Before the war, during the Depression, most people got by with less, but after the war there were new opportunities for everyone to have and produce more. America was in an expansion mode and the church was included.

Second, the post World War II environment featured the Cold War and the first competitive global environment developed with new technology. Radio and television began to broadcast new ideas and images directly into millions of living rooms, including images from the Soviet Union and Red China of life without God – an “atheistic” (godless) world filled with enemies and dangers. But against that evil stood America, a godly nation committed to good and everything that God wanted. The Pledge of Allegiance and American currency were modified to include explicit references to God. The Boy Scouts added a badge for “God and Country.” Being religious was equated with being good and being American, and being a Christian held the weight of righteousness and civil respectability.

Third, the return of so many World War II soldiers and the impact of affluence meant that many new families were forming— all at the same time. Because modern birth control methods (especially contraceptive pills) didn't become readily available until the 1960s, families quickly grew and caused a "baby-boom" that brought incredible numbers of children into society. Anything and everything that was needed to support them grew as well. As communities expanded, new schools were built and (you guessed it) churches built bigger buildings and educational wings. Many church facilities that were built in the 1950s and 60s featured cathedral-like sanctuaries and big educational wings. They expanded alongside everything around them.

But underneath all that expansion, trouble was brewing. Even during two decades of incredible growth in the church, the country was growing even faster, and the church began slipping in overall influence. Church involvement peaked as a percentage of the population in approximately 1950, and the percentage of Americans who actually belong to a church has been steadily declining since then. Even worse, the percentage of those who actually *participate* in church has been declining even faster. For over a half century – much of which was cloaked by the growth of the baby boom – the church has been gradually becoming less and less a part of the fabric of American lives.

By the time raw numbers made this reality obvious, the church was already much farther down the road to decline than it realized. Today, a relatively small percentage of Americans attend worship on a typical Sunday morning – somewhere between 12 and 16 percent, according to data provided by churches\*. That means that less than one in six people are in church on any given Sunday while others sleep, golf, shop, watch kids' sports games, or any of a zillion other things. As a result, many of those big, beautiful churches built in the 50s and 60s have empty seats, oppressive utility bills, and vacant classrooms.

***\*New data as of early 2022 suggests that around 8% of the US population attends worship in person on Sunday morning, and that this number continues to decline.***

Even among those who regularly attend church the rate of attendance has changed. While those who considered themselves "active" or "regular attenders" in 1950 came to church every week, someone with the same self-understanding today may only attend one or two times each month. This means that a church's base requires more members to help a sanctuary feel "full" than it would have a few decades ago.

The impact? When people do attend (especially visitors), it can feel as though they are visiting a dying remnant of days gone by, rather than a vibrant expression of a community that follows Jesus.

As the church becomes more of a minority activity in our culture, the chances of connecting with those who are not in the church decrease as well. With less social orientation toward encouraging church attendance, people are less inclined to prioritize church in their busy lives. And as fewer people attend, fewer people are spending time with others in their congregation. This is why congregations that believe that faith in Christ changes lives, and that participation in Christian community matters, will do well to train their members to invite others in.

Pastors often wish parishioners would invite more visitors to attend with them. Parishioners often report liking their church and finding life, meaning, and hope there. Yet the average mainline churchgoer rarely invites others to attend.

## **Why?**

Why are dedicated participants not inviting others to take part in a vibrant, meaningful, congregationally-based life? And based on what those issues are, how can we help change behaviors that have been internalized over decades and regain a more discipleship-based way of offering a life of faith and connection to Christ to others? There are all sorts of resources to explore the components of successful invitation, and how it can change lives and increase congregational vitality.

## **FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION**

### **Scripture**

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. In this section Paul reminds the church of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the power that it has to bring life to those who believe. How does this message get communicated where you worship? How has it given you life?

### **Questions**

Take time to reflect on these individually in a journal if you are reading this alone. Or, if you are reading this with a group, use the following questions to discuss what the people in your small group are thinking as a result of this chapter.

+ What in this chapter reminded you of some important idea or made you think in a new way?

+ As you think back as far as you can remember, what has changed about the place of church in the world around you?

+ Does it surprise you that *less than* one in six people attend worship each week? If so, why do you think this surprises you? If not, what signs have you seen that cued you into this?

+ How has participation changed in the congregation(s) you have been a part of? Think about age, ethnicity, and the numbers of people attending various aspects of church life. What shifts have you seen? What shifts didn't happen?

+ What changes in practice has your congregation already implemented in response to the changing landscape around you? Which changes have helped you be more missional? Which changes have been just to survive in declining situations? Which changes can you imagine might be possible now?